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ABSTRACT

Offering a fresh perspective on making writing meaningful in every classroom, this guide seeks to help the teacher and the parent encourage the student writer as a thinker, not merely as a producer of a paragraph. The guide offers guidance as well as many practical activities that will help students to: organize the mind; play with ideas; find satisfaction in drafting and revising; and share papers that have gone through a process of discovery. It is divided into the following eight chapters: (1) "The Emphasis on Discovery"; (2) "Examining the Familiar"; (3) "Two Ways of Looking at People"; (4) "The Audience Responds"; (5) "Examining Events"; (6) "Defining Words"; (7) "Controlling Tone"; and (8) "Grading Themes." The guide's conclusion emphasizes that the writing process should become an opportunity to develop a personal thinking process, a growth mechanism that will stimulate participants to become more astute observers and more competent learners than when they started. (NKA)

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Writing As a Process Of Discovery

Revised Edition

Structured Theme Assignments for Grades 5 - 12

by
Edward B. Jenkinson

with Andrea M. Jenkinson

ED 430 257

CS 216 740

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Writing As a Process of Discovery— A Practical Plan

Structured Theme Assignments

for Grades Five Through Twelve

by **Edward B. Jenkinson**

with **Andrea M. Jenkinson**

ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication

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Preface

In 1970, the Indiana University Press published *Writing As a Process of Discovery: Some Structured Theme Assignments for Grades Five Through Twelve* by Edward B. Jenkinson and Donald A. Seybold. That volume was one of ten in the English Curriculum Study Series produced by the Indiana University English Curriculum Study Center under my direction. In addition, the Center was responsible for three more books that were published by the Indiana State Department of Public Instruction.

A grant from the U.S. Office of Education established the IU Center in 1963. William H. Wiatt, now an Emeritus Professor of English, developed this approach to teaching composition when he worked in the Center during the summer of 1964. Prof. Wiatt repeatedly told me that the ideas for the pre-writing activities dated back to Quintillian, the first century Roman rhetorician. His telling me and pilot-school teachers that the underlying principles for this program were not new prompted the writing of these two paragraphs in the introduction:

> "This is not a revolutionary book on the teaching of composition, nor does it present a complete writing program for grades five through twelve. Rather, it describes a method of teaching students how to ask questions that will help them find both the information to include in their themes and the precise words with which to convey that information to a specific audience.
>
> "The theme assignments in this sequence are neither highly imaginative nor innovative; the steps that students follow in the writing process are not entirely new. The rhetorical principle of *inventio*, which is an integral part of every theme assignment even though the term itself is not used, dates back nearly two thousand years. The practice of having students write each theme for a specific audience, which is also emphasized in this book, has slowly worked its way into textbooks during the last decade."

After Prof. Wiatt wrote a draft for several of the first assignments, I worked with a group of teachers and the late Prof. Philip B. Daglian to design more assignments, all of which were tested by teachers in more than fifty pilot schools. One of the pilot-school teachers was Donald Seybold, who joined the Center in 1969 and helped to revise the sequence for publication.

The pilot-school teachers gave us many ideas for revision of the sequence, and they also sent us dozens of sample themes. Later, teachers who used the book talked with me about its strengths and weaknesses. Their comments influenced many changes and additions to the present volume.

My daughter, Andrea M. Jenkinson, re-edited the first volume, changing all of the masculine pronouns to nonsexist language, adding sub-headings, and bringing the samples up to date. She and I agreed on the deletion of 51 pages from the first book, and I wrote new chapters 1 and 8.

Several years ago, Prof. Carl B. Smith, Director of ERIC-REC and the EDINFO Press, suggested that I revise the original volume. His encouragement prompted me to enlist the aid of my daughter in the tedious process of ridding that volume of its masculine pronouns which were *de rigueur* in the sixties. She became more convinced than ever that a revised book was important after talking with Prof. Smith and after attending my retirement party. Among the tributes that I will always cherish was one from Joanne Frye, Chair of the Department of English at Bloomington North High School. She said that in her third year of teaching she read *Writing As a Process of Discovery*. After noting what she learned about the teaching of writing, she added: "But from that book I also learned to think differently about teaching. I learned that the classroom is really a laboratory for teachers and students, and, for the first time, I was conscious of the importance of professional reading, research, and reflection, and what those mean to my professional growth. Not bad for one little book."

Those comments and others like them have sustained me in a long career in education, and for them I am most grateful. My heartfelt thanks also to Professors Wiatt, Daghlian, and Smith, to Don Seybold and Andrea Jenkinson, to the teachers in the pilot schools, and to teachers who read the original book and told me that it made a significant contribution to the profession.

— *Edward B. Jenkinson*
Bloomington, Indiana
March 1, 1999

CHAPTER 1:

The Emphasis on Discovery

THE WRITING REVOLUTION THAT BEGAN IN THE LATE SIXTIES CONTINUES, CHANGING THE focus of instruction on the teaching of writing in thousands of classrooms at all grade levels. The emphases of many of the writing programs in the last two decades have been on writing processes and on personal (expressive) writing. This program, which was first published in 1970, emphasizes discovery, process, both expressive and transactional writing, and product. As students work through the suggested assignments, they write for different audiences for different purposes, consciously gathering information and refining diction to match their purposes. They also engage in conferencing and peer review. Furthermore, they participate in pre-writing exercises designed to help them find precise words and meanings for their themes.

Writing is a process of discovery. Every time I face the monitor with hands poised over the keyboard, I ask myself: Just what do you think you are doing? What do you know about the subject? What do you need to discover? For whom are you writing? Why?

As I write, I never fail to make discoveries. If it's a letter, I try to determine what I need to say and how I should say it to achieve my purpose and to communicate effectively with my reader. If it's an article, a chapter for a book, or even an entire book (when I muster up sufficient audacity to think I can write one), I know that I am to embark on a writing and researching adventure filled with discoveries.

Adventures in Discovery

My purpose in writing this revision of *Writing As a Process of Discovery* with the help of my daughter is to provide a series of adventures in discovery for students. I want them to discover for themselves what it means:

← to become familiar with one very useful pre-writing activity;

← to engage in pre-writing activities that will help them distinguish between fact/opinion, subjectivity/objectivity, and so forth;

← to choose language, experiment with syntax, and select information to communicate effectively with a specific audience for a definite purpose;

← to work with peers and a teacher in a writing lab;

← to examine examples of effective and ineffective written responses to the assignments.

The assignments that follow, then, are based upon the belief that writing involves a process of discovery in which writers attempt to find out what they know or do not know about their topic, their audience, their use of language, and themselves.

The assignments in this volume are designed to help students begin to understand writing processes, to explore their own worlds, and to explain their worlds to various audiences. The assignments do not constitute an entire composition program for junior and senior high school. Far from it. However, I feel that these assignments given early in junior high school, or even in upper elementary school, will help students understand writing processes and will enable them to write with greater ease on any topic assigned to them later or on any topic of their own choosing.

How to Use the Assignments

Professor Bill Wiatt and I never intended that all of these assignments be used in a single classroom or at a single grade level. Rather, we hoped that a teacher would select several (perhaps three or four) assignments in a sequence and work with students until they mastered the process and could use it for future writing tasks.

I believe these assignments must be given carefully, must be explained thoroughly, and must be given without unduly hurrying the student. If writing is a valuable experience, it should be well worth the time that it takes for writers to explore their topics and to express themselves clearly. Good writing is usually not done in a hurry.

During the class time given to writing, you should become as deeply involved as your students in the assignments that follow. Your first task is that of discussion leader. After explaining the assignment to students, you begin helping them ask questions≡or guide them through other methods of pre-writing exploration≡about the topic so that they can find pertinent answers to include in their themes. This can be done by giving them sample questions that you yourself would ask, and then by further leading them to formulate their own questions about the topic. As the students learn how to ask questions, you help them find answers. Furthermore, you help students choose precise words to include in those answers≡words that can be used in their themes.

After the session on posing questions, you again explain carefully what the theme assignment is. The students should be given time in class to write initial drafts. As students write the drafts, you can walk around the room, reading themes over shoulders, asking questions that might lead students to eliminate errors, to explain an idea more thoroughly, or to write more vivid descriptions. Give students opportunities to share their writing with their classmates, seeking help to improve their drafts. Whenever you can, you should write while the students write and share your writing with the class. This is not always possible since you will be conducting a writing lab, but I did find time to scratch out a few paragraphs and revise my work later, so I could share it and accept student comments.

Students Write to Communicate with You

You also serve as audience, making certain that students know they *are not* writing *for you* but writing *to communicate with you*. The students should also be given time to exchange papers as they are working on drafts so that they can determine if they are communicating with fellow students.

At all times in this sequence of theme assignments, the focus on the audience is essential. In several of the tasks that follow, this focus on audience is especially desirable. For instance, in one of the themes students are asked to write stories for children. Students should actually read the stories to children to make certain that they have communicated with them. In another assignment students are asked to write letters to editors of newspapers. The class should select the best letters and mail them to editors. In a third assignment students are asked to write editorials. Students, with your help, should select the very best editorials and submit them to the student newspaper.

You will think of many other ways to provide a representative audience for other theme assignments in this volume, and you might also consider some type of inexpensive publication that will serve the purpose of disseminating student writing to a larger audience.

Shared Experiences

Many teachers and student teachers that worked with parts of the program told me about experiences that are worth repeating here. One veteran teacher of college-bound seniors was particularly excited by the assignment that calls for students to write a story for children and then read it to them. Having made arrangements with a kindergarten teacher, the veteran took her class to the elementary school where her students read their stories to small groups of children. Responses thrilled most of the writers, some of whom willingly started revisions after they returned to their own classroom. One student announced, before the reading, that his story was perfect and that the children would love it. Sitting on the floor surrounded by his audience, the self-proclaimed Dr. Seuss began his story in tones that the veteran teacher described as

incredibly pompous. Before he had finished the first page, a little girl responded *with her literary criticism*. She crawled from her place in the group and bit the writer's leg. He did not finish reading his *perfect* story, and he made no more proclamations about his writing talents to his classmates.

Another veteran teacher told me how excited her students became after two of them had Letters to the Editor published in a local newspaper and a third experienced the thrill of seeing her editorial in the school newspaper.

With tears in her eyes, a teacher told me about a student who responded, reluctantly at first, to the assignment that called for him to examine an event in which he was personally involved. He did not want to write at first, but after he started he did not look up from his paper until he had finished a draft. The next day he began the revision and asked the teacher to read it. The young man had written a graphic account of an explosion at an ice show in which his aunt and uncle and dozens of others had been killed. After he finished his final revision, with the promise from the teacher that she not share his theme with his classmates, he told her that he could now think more clearly about the tragedy and perhaps partially dismiss it from his hitherto troubled mind.

Major Changes in This Revision

After reviewing the original book and notes taken after meeting with pilot-school and other teachers who used the book, and after conferring with the current co-author, I made several major changes in this revision. I removed the prologue, introduction, two theme assignments, and the appendices from the first book. My current co-author and I made a number of major and minor changes in the original.

Again, I want to point out that the assignments that follow do not constitute a complete writing program. Nor is this method offered as a panacea. It will not cure all the writing ills of students. However, if it does help students order their experiences by exploring their worlds to discover what they know and do not know about a variety of topics, about writing for specific audiences, about using language that works not only for themselves but for others, and about making discoveries about themselves, then the sequence is justified and the time spent on it is well worthwhile.

CHAPTER 2:
Examining the Familiar

THE THEME TASKS IN THIS BOOK ARE DESIGNED TO:

(1) help students learn how to ask questions about their topics so that they will discover what they know and do not know about them;

(2) help them sift through the answers to the questions, deciding which are pertinent for both their purpose and their audience;

(3) help them find precise words for effective communication with their readers;

(4) help them order their information appropriately so that their readers will understand it and so that the organization will help them achieve their purpose.

The first two tasks give students an opportunity to write about two things they think they know well. First, they write a subjective description of their neighborhoods. Second, they write a subjective description of something in their neighborhoods that they find appealing or unappealing. For each task, they are given both specific purposes and specific audiences.

Teachers in more than fifty junior, middle and high schools tested the program≡ some for more than three years. (Several dozen teachers who used the original book also discussed their successes and failures with the senior author.) In the original sequence, objective theme assignments preceded the present Themes 1 and 2. Those assignments called for the writers to describe their neighborhood objectively and then to describe a building in their community. Students found those assignments difficult, and the sample themes published in the first edition reflected student attitudes toward the assignments. Therefore, we did not include those assignments here. Instead,

students have the opportunity to write objectively as they describe a person in Theme 3. In other assignments they also have opportunities to write objectively and subjectively, depending on the nature of the writing task.

Pilot-school teachers reported that upper-elementary and junior high or middle school students may respond better than older students to the first five tasks. Some older students, particularly those who have been persuaded that they can write well or those who have experienced courses in creative writing, may resist an introduction to the methods presented here. On the other hand, at least two dozen pilot-school teachers of high school juniors and seniors observed that their students felt, many for the first time, that they understood what writing is all about after they had completed several of the tasks in this program.

Finding the Sequence Starting Point

According to the pilot-school teachers and the many teachers who have talked with me after the first book was published, I learned that this sequence can be started in any grade, from fifth through twelfth. Teachers of students in junior high school and below usually started with the first task and worked forward. Some teachers in senior high school started with Theme 7 and worked forward; others started at the beginning of the sequence if they felt their students could profit from the experience. If you start with any theme other than Theme 1, give students ample class time to learn how to ask questions to find information and precise words. You should also take them through the entire process for each theme you assign from this sequence.

Finally, pilot-school teachers reported that students who are taken through five or six of these assignments early in the fall semester write better themes on any other topics they are assigned.

Reading several hundred themes from pilot schools convinced me that the success of student writers depends to a great extent upon the willingness of the teacher to work with them to produce the best possible themes. When teachers worked through the tasks carefully and slowly, students usually wrote good, or at least acceptable, themes. When teachers assigned four themes in four consecutive days, the results were predictably poor.

Theme 1

The Writing Task

Students examine the block, apartment or condominium complex, the housing project, subdivision, or farm where they live. They pay particular attention to those things and/or people that make them like or dislike their neighborhoods. Then they describe their neighborhoods in such a way that their readers, students their own age, can tell immediately why the writer likes or dislikes it. As the writers examine their neighborhoods, they should concentrate on those features they can use to make a reader their own age feel the same way about the neighborhood as the writer does. Furthermore, the writers' task is to learn how to select and use words that will affect the reader(s) and stimulate a desired emotional response.

The Writers' and Teacher's Purposes

The writers' purposes are to express their feelings about their neighborhoods and to try to persuade a reader their own age, through choice of words and details, to react to the neighborhood in much the same manner as the writer does.

As the teacher, your purposes are:

(1) to help students learn how to gather information for their themes;

(2) to help them understand what writing for an audience means; and

(3) to help them learn how to choose words that stimulate emotional responses in readers.

Finding Information and Precise Words for an Audience

Pilot-school teachers devoted several class periods to helping students learn how to ask questions to gather information and to choose the specific words with which to convey that information to a reader. You may wish to spend some additional time, particularly with this first assignment, explaining what it means to write for an audience and how to go about it.

Students should realize that whatever they write will receive some response from the person for whom they are writing. Whether they are writing a letter, a theme, or a short story, their writing will be criticized by their readers=particularly if they fail to communicate. Students should realize that criticism of their writing does not have to be spoken or written; the lack of response on the part of a reader may sometimes be the most devastating criticism that a writer will ever receive. This lack of response may indicate that the reader did not understand the message, or was bored by it or by

the way it was written, or was not interested in the topic. Criticism of writing is frequently unspoken or unwritten, and students must be made aware of that. For example, if a student writes a letter to a friend requesting the performance of a specific task, the writer may consider that the communication was successful and that the request was a reasonable one if the friend actually performs the task. If the friend does not, the writer needs to reexamine both the request to make certain that it is reasonable and the letter to make certain that it is persuasive.

Writers who grasp the implications of an audience will make certain, through choice of words and details, that the audience understands what is wanted, or at least the writers will make every attempt to help the audience understand the message. The awareness of audience is vital for writers to discover what they know or do not know about their subjects, their use of language, and themselves. Therefore, it is important that students realize that they are trying to affect an audience. They must be aware of their goal both during the discussion of an assignment and during the actual writing. As they gather information for their themes, students should never lose sight of their purpose≡to present information in such a manner and in such precise words that their audience will react to their neighborhoods in some specific way.

Writing to Be Read by Peers

Immediately after explaining this first theme task to your students and after discussing with them what writing for an audience means, you should tell them that the audience for this theme is a person their own age who does not live in their community. Each student should understand that the purpose is not to please the reader or you, the ultimate judge of the paper, but to express personal feelings in a manner that the reader will feel the same way about the neighborhood as the writer does.

Students should discuss the problems and possibilities inherent in writing for readers their own age. They will probably consider the use of slang. You should not discourage such use in this particular theme, but you might point out that some slang words and expressions have particular meanings only in a limited area at a specific time period. Therefore, a student might not communicate with a reader who does not live in the same community if the writer employs slang words and phrases that are not widely used. You might have several students write current slang words or expressions on the chalkboard and then ask each student to write on a piece of paper what each of the words or expressions means. By discussing the many meanings that will probably be given to some of the words, you can help students conclude that the overuse of slang may block communication with a reader even when that person is the same age as the writer.

Every student in the class knows that you will be the final reader of the theme. But it should be made very clear that they are not writing to satisfy you or writing to please you in any way. Instead, they should be free to tell their primary reader, a

person their own age, exactly what they feel about the area in which they live. They should try to express their feelings in words that will make their reader feel approximately the same way about the neighborhood as the writer does.

Students should never feel that they are writing simply to please a teacher. As noted before, writing is a process of discovery. In that process, writers should learn what they know or do not know about their subject, their use of language, and their audience. They should always write honestly to express themselves, not to please someone else, unless that is the writer's avowed purpose. Students at all levels of instruction tend to think that whenever they get a poor grade on a theme they have not yet caught on to what the teacher wants or they do not know what the teacher likes. Students will never be able to explore their worlds honestly in writing in a classroom if they think that their job is to write only those things that please a teacher.

The Process of Asking Questions

After students have firmly in mind the fact that they are writing for a person their own age who lives in a different community, they are ready to begin the process of asking questions about their subject so that they can gather information to include in their composition. By taking students through a search for significant questions≡the kinds of questions writers ask to discover what is relevant in their experiences—you can help students learn how to find material that is appropriate to the purpose of the writing task and to the audience. The importance of the search for material through questioning cannot be stressed too much, for the student who does not learn how to question, how to probe, will probably treat most subjects only superficially.

For this particular task, the first questions that students ask might include some of those listed below. We suggest that you write several of those questions on the chalkboard before asking students to propose additional questions which should also be written on the chalkboard. You will want to encourage students to ask as many questions as possible, helping them analyze the questions to determine whether they are relevant in terms of the purpose of this task and the audience, and helping them group the questions in related categories. By grouping them carefully, you can help them structure their papers. For example, if the students were to ask the questions below, adding additional questions that stem from the answers to the first ones, they could put their answers together in an order that will give the theme structure.

Suggested Questions

1. What is special about my block, farm, apartment complex, condominium, subdivision, housing project, or community? What, if anything, makes it different from other blocks, farms, apartment complexes, condominiums, subdivisions, housing projects, or communities?

a. Do the kinds of buildings or the arrangement of buildings make it different from other neighborhoods? Or do the buildings and the arrangement of them make it look just like any other neighborhood in the area?

b. Are there any yards, trees, or flowers? Are the lawns mowed? Are there patches of dirt or weeds in the lawns? Are the yards big enough for children to play in?

c. How can I describe the buildings and the arrangement of them so that my reader will either like or dislike my neighborhood?

2. Is my neighborhood attractive because the houses or buildings are maintained well by the owners, or is it unattractive because it is old and rundown?

a. If the houses or buildings are kept in a state of good repair, how can I describe this condition to my reader so that they will find the block attractive?

b. If the neighborhood is "old and rundown," what words can I use to describe this condition instead of writing that the block is "old and rundown"? What do *old* and *rundown* mean?

c. Do I find my neighborhood attractive or unattractive because all the houses, apartment buildings or condominiums look alike? How can I best persuade my reader that the similarities of the structures make the neighborhood or community attractive or unattractive?

3. What things in my neighborhood do I find appealing or unappealing?

a. Why do I find them appealing or unappealing?

b. What words come to mind when I think of those things or when I see them?

c. What do those things look like?

d. What words can I use to help my reader picture those things?

4. What colors in my neighborhood make it appealing or unappealing?

a. Why do I find them appealing or unappealing?

b. What words can I use to help my reader picture those colors?

c. If paint is peeling off some of the buildings, or if stains on buildings make them unattractive, how can I best describe such conditions to my reader?

5. What odors in my neighborhood make it a pleasant or unpleasant place to live?

   a. Will my reader want to visit my neighborhood if I simply say that it "smells good"? If not, how can I best describe the odors? Are words like *fragrant* and *smells good* sufficient?

   b. If I find my neighborhood unpleasant because it "stinks," do I need to tell my reader more to persuade them that it is an unpleasant place because it "stinks"? What words can I use to persuade my reader that the odors are unpleasant?

   c. To help my reader smell those odors that are either pleasant or unpleasant, can I compare them with the odor of gardenias, or baking bread, or stale garlic, or rotting fish, or something else if such comparisons are appropriate?

   d. If the odors are difficult for me to describe, can I help my reader smell the odors by describing the source, such as a pizza parlor, rows of flowers, overloaded garbage cans, or the putrid smoke from nearby factories?

6. What kinds of people live in my neighborhood? Do they help make it a pleasant or unpleasant place in which to live? If the people in my neighborhood do not behave like people in other neighborhoods, should I describe some of their actions so that my reader will understand why the people make the neighborhood pleasant or unpleasant? Is it sufficient to tell my reader only that the people are friendly or unfriendly?

7. How much should I tell my reader?

   a. What must the reader know about my neighborhood to make them like it or dislike it?

   b. Should I tell them everything about my neighborhood, or should I tell only enough to make the reader feel the same way I do?

8. How should I begin my theme?

   a. Is it sufficient to begin simply by saying that "My block is great" (or "My block stinks")?

   b. Do such statements excite my interest when I read them? If they do not excite me, will they excite a reader?

   c. Is there a better way of getting started than by simply writing "My block is great"? If so, how should I begin my theme?

Challenging Questions and Precise Words

As already noted, students should be encouraged to ask as many questions as they can to help them find information and precise words to include in their themes. They should also be encouraged to challenge the questions that their classmates pose during this discussion, urging them to ask themselves if each question will yield an answer that is appropriate for the purpose of this particular task. You should further encourage students to enter into a dialogue in which they consider the use of such words as good, exciting, and great, and the effect that such words have on a reader.

As students search for precise words to answer the questions they posed in class discussion, you might want to discuss with them the various shades of meaning that words have for different persons. You might do this by having students discuss what kinds of things they consider to be exciting. By eliciting many answers from, say, collecting stamps to watching a horror movie, you can help students conclude that a word like exciting is used too frequently to describe many different things and activities. The word exciting by itself will probably not persuade a reader that the thing being described is truly exciting. Other words or phrases or use of details will probably need to be substituted for the word exciting to persuade a reader that the thing being described is actually exciting.

Through class discussion, then, students should begin to understand that simply calling a block beautiful or dirty is not enough to persuade readers that the block is pleasant or unpleasant. Instead, if writers dislike their neighborhoods, they need to pick out those objects that they dislike and describe them for their readers. Writers might also show why life is tolerable or intolerable on the block by describing some of the actions of neighbors. In their descriptions, they will want to use words that will make their readers either approve or disapprove of the actions of the neighbors. You need to emphasize to your students that a writer must select from all those things that are either appealing or unappealing and describe them in such a convincing manner that the reader will respond to the theme as the writer hopes that he or she will.

As already noted, as students pose questions you should help them decide which are pertinent and which are not. By so doing, you can help students avoid the inclusion of extraneous material in their themes, and you can further help them order the information while they are posing questions and considering the choice of words with which to answer those questions. For example, you might ask students how they plan to begin their descriptions if they like their neighborhoods. If several students like their neighborhoods because of the many trees and the new houses and the people, you might ask them which of those things makes the neighborhood most pleasant. Then you might suggest that they begin with a description of the most pleasant thing and move on from there. Or they may want to begin with a summary of the things on the block that make it pleasant. But regardless of how they begin, they must always bear in mind that they should arrange the material primarily for the benefit of a reader, not for themselves, and they should further arrange it in an order that will make the

greatest impression on a reader. During the discussion of the arrangement of material, you should encourage students to suggest several arrangements and also to argue with one another about the merits of the arrangements. These arguments should always center on the effectiveness of the arrangement for a reader, not for personal reasons.

No Formulas for Paragraphing in This Program

This program is not concerned with giving students any formulas for writing paragraphs. Instead, the goal is to help students collect information and put it into an order that works best for readers. We have learned from pilot-school teachers that students can arrive at their own designs for paragraphing if they always keep in mind that they are trying to group together certain pieces of information for a specific reader. Instead of giving them a great deal of instruction on paragraphing (most of which is ignored by writers anyway), you can perform a greater service by helping students arrange the questions in an order that will yield answers they can put together in one or two paragraphs.

(NOTE: Theme 16, the final assignment in this sequence, calls for students to write three-paragraph editorials. That assignment emphasizes one approach to paragraphing for a specific purpose.)

The student who wrote the theme on page 29 did not receive any instruction in paragraphing. Instead, the teacher simply helped group together the questions in such a manner that the student(s) could arrange answers to those questions in an order that works best for the reader; and no one should fault the writer of that theme on her paragraphing.

Again, we need to stress the importance of free and prolonged discussion (so long as it is lively and fruitful) of the problem of finding information and precise words. We are convinced that student writers need all the help they can get both from their teachers and from one another. Pilot-school teachers assured me that class time is very well spent when they take several class periods for the initial themes in this sequence (or for the first writing assignments a teacher might give from any part of this sequence). They help students pose questions, discuss answers, select words, and consider ways of arranging their answers.

The Actual Writing

We strongly recommend that students write, in class, their first drafts of any of these theme assignments. By looking over their shoulders, you can help student writers avoid serious errors that, if marked on their final drafts, will only convince them that they cannot write well. Therefore, you should attempt to help each student avoid such errors by examining the first draft as it is being written. By asking questions, you can lead students to see their own errors in thinking, or in mechanics, or in sentence

structure. In some cases, you can help students detect their own errors by simply reading the sentences aloud two or three times.

As I taught an ungraded class of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders in a summer class for "losers," I discovered this is one of the most effective ways to get rid of run-on sentences without worrying about what run-on sentences are. By running the two sentences together as you read them, you might help students realize that they need a period. Or by reading the run-on as two distinct sentences, pausing long enough so they understand that you are definitely pausing, you might help them realize that they need a period. Students may be prompted to correct serious errors in punctuation, spelling, and usage by being asked appropriate questions instead of by simply being given directions or information. You need not indicate that something is wrong; you need only ask questions so that students will learn to detect their own mistakes. You can also help students clarify and/or qualify statements by asking them questions as they are writing their drafts. Thus, instruction comes during the act of writing and not after the fact in the form of meaningless red marks on the paper.

Revision

Few self-respecting writers ever give manuscripts to editors or agents without spending considerable time revising and rewriting. When writers send manuscripts to editors or agents, they expect an intelligent, critical response. Writers assume that editors or agents will read their manuscripts carefully, calling attention to areas that might need to be reworked but not rejecting the manuscript out of hand or calling for a revision without specific directions. On the other hand, many students know that their teachers completely reject their themes, by giving them an F or by making them revise their papers without pointing out weaknesses (other than mechanical) and strengths.

Students are frequently asked to revise their themes at the wrong time. When they submit their first drafts for your evaluation, they are likely to cause you to spend hours with your red pencil. And they are not apt to understand many of the marks unless you tell them specifically why their themes need to be revised. Furthermore, most students mistake revising for proofreading.

Revision of themes should be done before students hand their finished products to you so that they will give you the best themes that they can write. By having students revise their themes before they turn them in, we are convinced that you will spare yourself a great deal of grief and red-pencil time. You will also instill confidence in your students if they know that their writing will be read sympathetically and that their papers will be marked for only those serious errors that remain in the revision. We believe that writing should be an educational activity-not a punitive enterprise.

Suggested Steps for Revision

But how do students go about revising papers before you have read them? We suggest these steps:

1. After the students have written their first drafts in class, correcting those errors and weaknesses in thinking that you have called to their attention through your questions, they should read their papers aloud to themselves several times. They should make certain that they have said exactly what they want to say and they should also attempt to detect their own errors or weaknesses. By reading their papers aloud, students should be able to detect errors in punctuation through intonation. They might also find words that are inadequate and sentences or paragraphs that are inappropriately arranged or not written well if they keep asking themselves as they read, "Am I telling my reader exactly what I want to?"

2. After reading their papers aloud to themselves several times, students should then read their papers to at least one of their classmates, noting specific peer reactions to the theme. This step gives the writers another opportunity to read the paper aloud—this time to an audience. After the students have read their papers, they should ask their classmates to respond to the description of the block. Since the writer's purpose for this particular assignment is to make the reader feel approximately the same way about the neighborhood as the writer does, the student writers should ask their classmates how they feel about the neighborhood. If classmates do not respond the way the writers think they should, the writers should ask the classmates why. The answer should, if the classmates respond honestly, give the writers some ideas for revision. The student writers should also ask their classmates if they understood everything in the paper. If the classmate did not, the writer should begin thinking seriously about choice of words and construction of sentences, after asking the classmate exactly what was not understood.

3. After the writers have read their papers to at least one classmate, they should give it to someone outside the class to read. By the time they get to this reader, they may have written a second draft to eliminate the problems in the first one. Students should ask this particular reader to tell them exactly what they think about the theme. The writers should determine how they have affected the reader through their descriptions. They should also try to determine what the readers did not understand and why they did not understand it. Then the writers should reexamine their themes, making a further revision if it seems necessary.

All of this takes time, but good writing always takes time. We suggest that you not ask students to hand in a theme on the day after they have written the first draft. Instead, give them several days in which to read the theme aloud to themselves and to a classmate, and to give a third reader an opportunity to read and respond to the theme before the student revises it for submission.

Through this process of revision, students should begin to appreciate what it means to write for a reader, and they might also experience the satisfaction that comes when a reader responds enthusiastically to what they have written. Furthermore, they should realize that the final draft they hand to you will be read carefully and critically, but also sympathetically. They should look upon you as an editor who will decide whether or not their paper is worth publishing. If they know that they are writing to be read, not simply to be marked down for errors, we are convinced that they will make every attempt to turn in their best work. Pilot-school teachers reported that poor spellers spent time looking up words in a dictionary so that they would not make silly errors since they wanted their papers to be read appreciatively by the teacher.

Evaluation

When we ask students to subject themselves to the painful process of discovering for themselves what they know and do not know about a specific subject and to search for words and an arrangement that will convey their thoughts or ideas to a reader, we should be willing to spend time writing appropriate responses to their efforts. No matter what students write or how poorly they write, we should first search for something in the paper to which we can respond positively. We should respond in a paragraph or two at the end of their paper, not just write the word good or excellent or poor or trite. We do not help a student by simply writing "Good job, Johnny." The student probably does not understand why it is a good job.

Whenever we ask a student to spend a great deal of time writing a theme, we should be willing to take the time to evaluate it and to respond to it. Therefore, we oppose the rather common practice of some teachers who evaluate only every other set of themes, or even every third or fourth set. We are not convinced that students learn to write better by writing frequently if their papers are not read critically. Rather, we are convinced that students learn to write better when they are certain that each paper they write is important enough to merit our spending time reading and responding to it.

We know that evaluation takes hours, and we believe that we can help students more by assigning fewer themes, giving them sufficient time to write and revise, and allowing ourselves ample time for a considerate evaluation. After students engage in conferencing and peer review, participate in a writing lab, and revise their themes, they should hand in papers that require little error-marking time and more time for comments.

There is nothing wrong with using the correction symbols included in many grammar and composition textbooks so long as the students know why those marks appear in the margin. But we do not endorse the practice of a teacher's simply writing cw or sp in the margin, expecting the student to find their errors. If they knew what their errors were, they wouldn't have made them in the first place.

Nor do we endorse the practice of marking every error on the themes. Instead, we believe that you should mark only those errors that block communication, and you

should indicate why communication is blocked. We define errors as elements in a theme that stand between the writer and their reader. Serious errors include the omission of details or the inclusion of irrelevant details which detract from the writer's purpose. In this sense, all errors that prevent writers from achieving their purpose are errors in communication and should be marked.

A Built-in Standard for Excellence

In evaluating papers, you should remember that the standard for excellence is built into the purpose of the theme task. In the case of Theme 1, a good theme is one which, in your opinion, persuades you to like or dislike the writer's neighborhood because of the choice of details and selection of words. A good theme describes the neighborhood so well that even you would (or would not) want to visit it. A poor theme is one that does not offer you enough information to make you feel one way or another about the writer's neighborhood. Or a poor theme is one that contains so many errors that block communication that you cannot respond intelligently to it. Sentence fragments, run-on sentences, faulty punctuation, and bad spelling are not primary criteria for judging the merits of these themes. Serious errors should be marked, but the writer should not be penalized for them unless they thwart the purpose and stand between the writer and the reader.

We do not believe that you should go through the painful process of trying to give a letter grade to each paper. Rather, we suggest that you write at least one full paragraph of comment on each theme, giving at least two or three specific reasons why you think it is a good theme, a poor theme, or an acceptable one. As classroom teachers, we found it exceedingly difficult to justify the difference between an A paper and a B paper unless we used some artificial criteria such as number of errors or maturity of sentences (and we are not certain what maturity of sentences means). Instead of becoming frustrated by the arbitrariness of assigning letter grades, we suggest that you make very clear to students, before they start a specific assignment, what constitutes a good theme, a poor theme, or an acceptable one and that you then explain your decision on each paper. Teachers who were concerned about recording grades in the grade book resisted this suggestion at first, protesting that students wanted a letter grade. However, several pilot-school teachers who followed this suggestion told us that students became more interested in the comment and learned from it, forgetting the grade when the teacher took time to write a serious comment. Furthermore, if you think it is necessary, you can tell students that a good theme will be recorded as an A in your grade book; an acceptable or passable theme as a C; and a poor theme as an F.

Several teachers reported that their students keep all of their written work, including drafts, in writing folders. Those teachers said they do not put a letter grade on each theme; rather, they examine the folders near the end of a grading period, talk with students about their work and their progress, and then record a grade.

Finally, we believe that evaluation is worthless if it does not instruct. Therefore, we scorn the practice of evaluating a paper by writing only a one-word comment or a single phrase on it. Such evaluation is of little value to the student. As we have noted several times thus far, students need all the help that they can get. That help should come in the form of a careful and thorough explanation of the task. Or it should be in the writing laboratory during which you help them search for better ways to express themselves or help them avoid errors. Help should also be given in the evaluation in which you give them sufficient critical commentary to help them write an even better paper the next time. (A sample evaluation of a theme is included in sample themes.)

Sample Themes

You should select up to three fairly good papers (or two poor themes if you can protect the identity of the writer) to project on the overhead or reproduce for classroom discussion. By having students examine several papers written on the same topic they wrote about, they can, perhaps, better understand what they did well or where they went wrong.

Teachers have told us that the study of sample themes can be of great value to a student only if they set the proper tone for the discussion. By not identifying the authors of the papers or by selecting papers written by students in another class without identifying the students, pilot-school teachers were able to take students through several studies of sample themes, generating discussions that led to intelligent criticisms of themes. After several successful discussions, pilot-school teachers reported that they were then able to select themes written by students in the class that was discussing them and stimulate intelligent, critical comments. You need to help students understand that criticism is both positive and negative, and the critic has an obligation to suggest how weaknesses can be strengthened.

Each theme should be examined along the lines laid down in preparing students to write. The questions you ask to lead discussion should always focus on the paper under consideration and whether it achieved the purpose of the assignment and whether the writer communicated with and affected the audience. Some sample questions follow the theme printed below.

This sample theme was written by a young sixth grader in an ungraded class of fifth through eighth graders in a school labeled a "ghetto school." (The very old building was just three blocks from where rioters burned several blocks. The "cocktails" she mentions are Molotov cocktails.) Like her classmates, she scored well below 100 on a standardized IQ test. The teacher dismissed the scores and focused her attention on the students, their native abilities, and cultural differences. The teacher encouraged her students to write exactly how they felt about their neighborhoods, and she took the class through the steps outlined in this chapter. The young girl knew her paper would be read sympathetically, yet critically, with the teacher noting only those errors that blocked communication. Her theme is reprinted here without editing.

My Messy Surroundings

My street is a dump. It's a real junkyard. First of all it's a dead end street with holes all around, half of a sidewalk, and a rocky pavement. The houses are too close together, hardly any garages, and yards too small to hold a bicycle. It doesn't sound too bad, but how would like to live there? With loud-mouth kids playing in front of your house everyday, mean dogs chasing you every time you came outside, and have a Mill Creek in back of your house that has a scent that's out of this world.

If you think that's bad you ought to hear this. There's these evil little imps who run around starting fights and then getting their big brothers and sisters to fight for them. I mean these kids are really bad. If you got something new, say a new dress, they'll try to tear up your dress and then say, "I didn't mean to tear your dress."

That's just day time. Night time is worst. You can't sleep for horns blowing and people coming and going all hours of the night. The gun shots are not so bad but when they start throwing cocktails you know they're not celebrating the 4th of July.

All that mischief is just too much for one little cut-off dead end street. No wonder people are moving away. They don't want to live near our street.

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Sample Questions for Class Discussion

1. Why does this writer's description of her block make you like or dislike it? Why, specifically, would you or would you not like to live there?

2. What specific words or phrases make you dislike the block?

3. What specific words or sentences help you picture this particular block? Has she given you a sufficient word picture to help you see the block as she does?

4. Are all of the words, phrases, and sentences important in this theme? If not, which words, phrases, and sentences could have been left out? Why?

5. In her first draft, the writer began her paper with "I think my street is a dump." Did she strengthen that first sentence by removing "I think"? Why, or why not?

6. In her first draft, the writer ended her theme with this paragraph: "You've heard about my messy surroundings. I hope yours are better." Did she strengthen her paper by leaving that paragraph out of the final draft? Why, or why not?

7. Which sentences are the most effective in this theme? Why do you think so?

8. Why do you think the writer communicated, or failed to communicate, with her audience? Why do you think the writer affected, or failed to affect, her audience?

9. Did the writer achieve the purposes for this particular theme task? (By this time each student should be well aware of the purposes for this task.) Why do you think so?

10. Give the reasons why you would rate this theme as good, poor, or acceptable. If you had written this paper, what comments could the teacher make on it that would be most helpful?

Comments

We think that "My Messy Surroundings" is a most effective theme—one that deserves praise. Had we evaluated the theme, we would have written a comment like:

"This is a powerfully written theme. It definitely makes your reader dislike the block as much as you apparently do. You succeed in describing the crowded area quite well with just a few words in your first paragraph. Your third and fourth sentences are very effective."

"You have described actions of your neighbors that make the reader feel that your neighborhood is not a pleasant place in which to live. Your description of a few of the

actions of the "evil little imps" convinces your reader that they are mean. The quotation underscores their meanness."

> *"Your description of night time in your neighborhood is one that I will remember for a long time."*
>
> *"This is a very good theme, and, with your permission, I plan to read it to the class."*

We would not have mentioned the few errors in punctuation, usage, and spelling because they do not block communication. Had we been teaching the class, we would have considered those minor errors our responsibility. As the young girl worked on her first draft, we could have helped her eliminate the errors by asking questions, by reading sentences aloud, and by having her read them aloud, paying particular attention to intonation patterns and pauses that indicate commas might be helpful. Thus, instruction in mechanics and spelling would have been given during the actual writing, not during the evaluation.

Theme 2

The Writing Task

Students select some object that they like or dislike intensely in their neighborhood, in their home, in the city, or in the school. They are to select an object or place—not a person—that causes them to react emotionally to it. The students' emotional response may be one of standing for several minutes admiring the object, or it may be that they try to avoid the object because it disgusts them. After selecting the object or place, they are to describe it realistically in such a manner as to cause their reader (in this case, the teacher) to react in the same manner as the writer does.

(Several pilot-school teachers reported that some of their students chose to describe their bedrooms, or a particular business establishment in their community, or a favorite hangout. Some students described trees, paintings, trinkets and even articles of clothing. The student should feel absolutely free to select any object or place for this theme just so long as it is one that causes them to react emotionally whenever they see it. It must also not violate the limits of good taste.)

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The writer's purposes are to express their feelings about a particular object or place and try to persuade their reader, through choice of words and details, to react to that object or place in much the same manner as the writer does.

As the teacher, your purposes are:

← to continue helping students learn how to gather information for their themes,

← to continue helping them understand what writing for an audience means and what triggering an emotional response in an audience requires, and

← to continue helping them learn how to choose words that stimulate emotional responses in readers.

Finding Information and Precise Words for an Audience

After the student writers have selected objects that please or displease them, you should give the class sufficient time to consider the problem of posing questions and searching for precise words with which to answer those questions. Before students begin asking questions and selecting precise words, they should be told that you are the audience for this theme. You might want to discuss with them again what writing for an audience means, and you might also make clear that students are writing to communicate with you—not to please you. (See page 13.)

For this theme assignment, some of the questions that were suggested for Theme 1 will also yield appropriate information. Other questions also need to be asked, and students should consider, in class discussion, a number of them. Here are just a few that you might want to suggest if students do not pose them first:

1. Why do I like or dislike the object that I selected?
   a. What about it pleases or displeases me?
   b. Are there particular colors that please or displease me?
   c. Are there particular odors that please or displease me?
   d. What words can I use to convey to the reader why the particular colors please or displease me, and what words can I use to convey to the reader that the odors please or displease me?
   e. Does the shape of the object please or displease me? If so, why?
   f. What is the shape of the object? What words can I use to describe it?
2. How do I feel every time I see the object?
   a. How can I express that feeling to a reader?
   b. Is it sufficient to tell the reader that the object is beautiful or ugly or pleasing or unpleasing, or must I describe it more adequately to get them to feel the same way about the object as I do?

3. Can I honestly say what there is about the object that pleases or displeases me intensely, or do I like or dislike it so much that I cannot analyze it objectively?

    a. If I can't look at a thing objectively to determine why I like or dislike it intensely, can I find words forceful enough to convey my emotions to the reader?

    b. When I reexamine the object to try to determine why I respond to it in a particular manner, can I look at it without becoming emotional?

Those last three questions are difficult for junior high or upper elementary students to answer if they are not considered carefully in class discussion. We pose such questions because we have learned that the major danger in this assignment is the tendency for a student to overreact to the object being described. Many students tended to think that hyperbole is necessary to get readers to respond the way they wanted them to. As a result of this tendency to overreact or use hyperbole excessively, many of the themes were false, stilted, or mushy. Your problem is to help students avoid romanticizing their observations so much as to make them unbelievable, and perhaps even embarrassing to the reader.

To show students how the overuse of hyperbole might make a reader distrust the writer, you might select an advertisement that makes excessive claims for a product. As students analyze the advertisement, you might ask them which words they doubt. Does the soap, for example, make clothes the whitest white ever? Will the deodorant guarantee that the young lady will catch her man and lead him to the altar? Is the advertisement copy believable? If not, why not? Has the advertising copywriters overstated their case? Have they made so many claims that the reader begins doubting them and the product? Why do students believe that the writers used the words that they did and why did they make so many claims? What was their purpose? Did they achieve their purpose if the students tend to doubt what they say?

Being Honest with the Audience

The point to be made here is that the student writer must always be honest with themselves and with their audience if they intend to persuade their reader to feel the same way about any object as they do. They cannot overstate their feelings. They cannot attribute to an object qualities that it does not have. Nor should they attribute to themselves emotional responses that they do not honestly make. In other words, they must always "tell it like it is" if they plan to persuade their reader.

This is one of the fundamental problems in communication. Many writers, politicians, teachers, religious leaders, labor leaders, and businessmen tend to overstate their case. As a result, we tend to disbelieve what they say. Some people can persuade us to act the way they want us to through exaggeration, excessive claims, hyperbole, and effusive language; others fail. They fail because they push us to the point that we can no longer believe what they say. (See Theme A below.)

The problem here is to help the student avoid making excessive claims about the object they are describing, to help them avoid using language that is not believable, and to help them understand that even though they are attempting to trigger an emotional response in their reader, they must always be honest with themselves and with the object they are describing.

Students should understand that once their readers begin asking, "Do they really expect me to believe this?" they have probably caused readers to react in just the opposite way from they intended.

The Assignment

Student who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to describe an object or place that they either like or dislike intensely;

2. that they are to use words that will make their reader (the teacher) feel the same way about the object as they do; and

3. that they are to avoid using words like *good*, *bad*, *pretty*, or *ugly*, but instead to describe the object so that the reader will consider the object as being good, bad, pretty, or ugly.

See Theme 1

For a discussion of the actual writing, revision, and evaluation, see Theme 1.

After the students have read their themes aloud to themselves several times and after they have read it to another student, they should give their theme to an older person to read since the intended audience for this theme is the teacher. (See #3 under Revision in Theme 1.)

Sample Themes

For a discussion of sample themes, see Theme 1.

To illustrate the problem of overstatement by a student, we include two themes with sample questions for class discussion. You might find similar themes written by your students that can be discussed to show the problems writers create for themselves when they either get carried away with their subject or are dishonest with their approach to it.

Theme A

The sun shines! Like two worshipers of the sun, the two trees lift their life-like limbs and drink in the warm, clear sunshine. Their thirst quenched, almost immediately the birds begin the day by ridding the trees of insects and dead limbs from their freshly-combed hair. This task accomplished, the trees now ready themselves for a day of many activities such as: cleaning the birds nests, fluffing the newly-grown buds, and keeping their trunks well-groomed. Afternoon arrives accompanied by billowy clouds and humid weather. The trees have been working tirelessly all morning. Time for rest! All is quiet except for the faint rustling of wind blown branches.

Theme B

There used to be a tree next to the driveway at home. It was a birch. I really liked that tree. I mean, you can really become attached to a tree. Do you know what I mean? It had smooth bark that didn't even feel like bark. It felt like paper with gnarled bumps on it. When the wind blew through its small branches you were scared to death it would break. It was fragile like that. You could take both hands and wrap them around the trunk with half a hand left over. That made you feel like protecting it. I guess that's why I panicked every time it stormed. Then one day it got run over. My grandfather backed into it with the car and killed it. That was one of the only things I really liked about the place and it had to get run over.

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Sample Questions for Class Discussion

1. What do you feel about the two trees in Theme A? How do you think the writer feels about them? What words, phrases, or sentences lead you to that conclusion?

2. What do you feel about the tree in Theme B? How do you think the writer feels about it? What words, phrases, or sentences lead you to that conclusion?

3. Which theme do you think is the better of the two? Give reasons for your answer.

4. What does the writer of Theme A mean by "life-like" limbs? Does the writer mean that the limbs are like human arms, or do they mean that the tree has life and therefore its limbs must also have life?

5. Does a tree drink warm sunshine? What kinds of birds does the writer of Theme A see if they are able to rid the trees of dead limbs, not dead twigs? Do you think that the writer of Theme A has ever seen trees clean birds' nests, fluff buds, and keep their trunks well-groomed? Why do you or do you not think that she has given an honest description of the trees?

6. In Theme A, the writer says that "Afternoon arrives accompanied by billowy clouds and humid weather." Do we experience this phenomenon every afternoon? If not, how do you react to this and other sentences in Theme A? Is the writer describing what she sees or is she imagining something? Can you react positively and appreciatively to her imaginings? Explain your answer.

7. What do you learn about the tree in Theme B? Can you picture it? Can you trust the writer's description of it? Explain your answers

8. You might conclude that the writer of Theme A gets carried away with words without paying too much attention to their meanings. What can you conclude about the writer's use of words in Theme B?

9. If you were to rate these two themes as good, poor, or acceptable, explain how you would rate the themes and tell why you would give them the ratings you decided upon.

10. If you were the teacher, what comments would you write on each paper to help the student write a better theme next time?

CHAPTER 3:

Two Ways of Looking at People

THE TWO TASKS IN THIS CHAPTER FOCUS ON PEOPLE. FIRST, THERE IS AN OBJECTIVE description of someone the writer knows well, and then a subjective or impressionistic description of a real or imaginary person. Theme 3 asks the writer to be objective, not subjective. Therefore, students who have difficulty distinguishing between objectivity and subjectivity, between fact and opinion, may need preliminary exercises like the ones described below.

Consciously or unconsciously, students tend to turn statements of fact into statements of opinion by inserting a single word or phrase. For example:

Missy is president of the senior class.

The very intelligent Missy is president of the senior class.

Bob Jones wants to be quarterback for the Panthers.

The very slow Bob Jones wants to be quarterback for the Panthers.

Or by using imprecise language, students write and speak statements that they think are factual but do not convey the facts adequately. For example:

Eaton High is huge.

Eaton High is ugly.

What does *huge* mean? Although few people would ever measure a building to determine just what huge means, to some, huge could apply only to a school building that is, say, at least two stories high and one thousand feet by two thousand feet. To others, a huge building might be one that covers a city block. And the term city block is also imprecise since the dimensions of a block may vary from city to city and also

from one section of a city to the next. As far as *ugly* is concerned, people do not always agree on what that term means. The old saying that "Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder" also applies to ugly.

Why Start with Obvious Statements?

You may wonder why this chapter begins with such obvious statements. They are obvious to you but probably not to your students. For you, distinguishing between fact and opinion is not difficult. For you, detecting language that is imprecise and therefore inadequate for conveying facts accurately is fairly easy. But for your students, it is far easier to write and speak opinions rather than facts; it is far easier to deal in generalities than in precise statements; it is far easier to be subjective than objective.

In the first two theme tasks in this book, students had opportunities to express their opinions, to be subjective, to use emotive language as they described two things they knew well. In the first task in this chapter, students write about someone they think they know well. But unlike the first two assignments, this task calls for an objective rather than a subjective description; this theme calls for statements of fact rather than statements of opinion, for factual rather than emotive language.

In the experimental sequence of theme assignments tested by pilot-school teachers, we asked students to write objective descriptions before they wrote the subjective descriptions outlined in chapter 2. We learned from pilot-school teachers that it is far easier for students to write subjectively before they attempt to write objectively. We also learned from pilot-school teachers that students still need a great deal of assistance in learning how to ask questions that will help them gather information for their themes and that will also help them find precise words with which to convey that information. We have further learned that students need to be involved in more discussions about writing for an audience. In such discussions, they need to be reminded that their choice of words and details to be included in a theme should be dictated, to a large extent, by both their purpose for writing and their intended audience.

We have dropped themes 3 and 4 from the original book. Those assignments called for an objective description of the student's neighborhood, and then of something the student liked or disliked. The questions for Theme 3 probed for information about the student's neighborhood. Theme 4's questions pertained to the objective description of a building. Students found both assignments difficult and somewhat boring.

Additional Exercise

We discovered from the original assignments that students needed a great deal of help to distinguish between fact and opinion, objectivity and subjectivity. So we suggest that you might write a sentence like this on the chalkboard:

He is a _____ coach.

As students suggest words that can be put into the blank, you might first put all the words in a single column and then ask them to put the words into one of two columns like this:

Fact	Opinion
football	good
backfield	bad
line	personable
baseball	mean
basketball	likable
drama	tough

Then you might ask students why they put words like *football* and *backfield* in the column under **Fact** and *good* and *bad* in the column under **Opinion**. Can they verify that a coach is a football coach, a drama coach, and so on? How can they prove it? If they can prove the statement, is it a fact?

On the other hand, how can they prove that a coach is *good* or *bad*? Who says so? On what facts are the opinions based? Can a coach be called a "good coach" even though the team loses most of its games? Can a coach be called a "bad coach" even though the team wins most of its games?

After discussing the two columns of words sufficiently so students can distinguish between words that convey facts—statements that can be verified—and those that express personal opinions, you might put several words under a third column like this:

Inadequate Information
winning
losing
tall
short

What are "winning coaches"? Are they "winning" in the sense of that word's meaning as *pleasing*? Or have their teams won more games than they have lost? Does a record of sixteen wins and fourteen losses merit the phrase "winning coach"? Or does only a record of, say, twenty wins and ten losses merit such an accolade?

The point to be made here is that words like *winning, losing, tall*, and *short* may be based on fact. But the words mean so many different things to different people that they are not precise indicators of fact unless the writer gives them a specific objective definition within the context of a particular sentence or paragraph.

Next you might write sentences like these on the chalkboard, asking students to fill the blanks with as many words or phrases as they can and then asking them to decide whether the words or phrases should be placed under the headings Fact, Opinion, or Inadequate Information:

1. Myra's house is _____.
2. Jerry drove the car down the street _____.
3. Ms. Smith, the _____ president of the Third National Bank, did not give dad a loan.
4. The _____ teacher _____ tells students to _____.
5. The championship game between the _____ Ralston Tigers and the _____ Sawmill Cutters was _____.

On the surface, these kinds of warm-up exercises may seem too simple, or unimportant, or uninteresting. But if you believe that they are important and you convey that attitude to students, the results should prove to be worthwhile.

You might also have students read several stories on the front page of a local newspaper, asking them to pick out statements of fact and opinion, and then asking them to put specific words under the three column headings: Fact, Opinion, Inadequate Information.

Having examined the themes written by students in pilot schools, we learned that warm-up exercises are necessary to help students write the two themes described in this chapter. If they do not discuss the differences between statements of fact and statements of opinion first, they are not likely to write objectively for the first task. Instead, they may simply write subjectively for both tasks.

Theme 3

Theme Task

Students write an objective description of a person they know well, concentrating on physical features and distinguishing characteristics.

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The students' purpose is to describe a friend or relative accurately and adequately so their reader, the teacher, can pick out the described person from all others, relying solely upon the writer's description.

As the teacher, your purposes are:

(1) to help students understand what an objective description of a person entails and how it can be used;

(2) to help students distinguish between objective and subjective descriptions; and

(3) to help students find information for factual descriptions and precise words that convey facts, not opinions.

Finding Information and Precise Words for an Audience

Before you begin discussing how to gather facts needed to describe a person objectively, you might ask students how they would use such a description. Since the purpose of this description is identification, students might think of specific instances in which a physical description serves a real purpose. Here are three sample responses students might give.

(1) If a little child wanders away from home, their parents must describe them adequately so that other people can help look for them.

(2) If a bank is robbed, the teller (or other witnesses) must describe the bank robber so accurately that the police can find and apprehend them.

(3) When people plan to meet strangers at a busy airport, they might write a description of themselves so the stranger can spot them in the crowd.

You will want to point out to students that real situations in which identification is useful have no bearing on this theme. Some students in pilot classes became so preoccupied with constructing hypothetical situations in their themes that they spent two-thirds of their time describing the situations instead of focusing on the persons to be described. (See *Evaluation.*) The only reason for discussing situations at all is to

help students understand that writing to identify a person can serve a real purpose, one that they might use later in life.

You should remind students that they are concerned with people as they actually see them, not as they want them to be. You should also remind students that they can list specific facts about people under separate headings as they gather their information. To illustrate this as a method of gathering information, you might have students think of people they know well and then volunteer information that can be written on the chalkboard under headings like these:

Age	Height	Weight	Color
boy	tall	fat	pale
infant	short	skinny	swarthy
middle-aged	over six feet	pleasingly plump	sunburned
twenty	5' 2"	145 pounds	copper
Eyes	**Hair**	**Nose**	**Build**
hazel	brunette	Roman	husky
blue	dishwater blonde	broken	slight
crossed	frosted blonde	upturned	curvaceous
wears glasses	bald	big	perfect

Suggested Questions

After students have listed as many words as they can under the headings suggested above and other headings they suggest, you and the class might begin challenging the words with questions like these:

1. How old is a boy? a girl? an infant? a middle-aged woman? Will your reader know exactly what you mean if you use such words?

2. What is short? How short is short? How tall is tall? Is your reader likely to define short the same way you do?

3. What is a Roman nose? an upturned nose? Are those terms precise enough to describe a nose adequately for your reader?

4. What is a dishwater blonde? a frosted blonde? Will your reader be able to picture your subject's hair if you use terms like those?

5. What comes to your mind if you hear that a person is bald? If a man has any hair at all, can you simply call him bald and expect your reader to know what you mean?

6. If you say a young lady has a "perfect" build, is that a statement of fact or opinion?

Reminding students of the purpose of this assignment, you may want to ask them to suggest other categories such as mannerisms and dress. As they list items under both categories, you and the students should challenge the items, making certain that each mannerism is one that a reader can detect easily and that each garment is one that the person is likely to wear frequently, not on special occasions only. For example, if a student suggests as a mannerism that the subject always puts their elbows on the table while eating, you should point out that such information will not help a reader pick the described person out of a crowd unless the subject is in a cafeteria or a restaurant. If a student suggests that the teenage girl they are describing wears a hair net, this information would be of little value to the reader unless the girl always wears a hair net. On the other hand, if she always wears a charm bracelet on her left arm, this might be a useful piece of information that will help the reader identify her.

To be useful, details must not only be stated in precise words, but they must also be relevant to the purpose. Out of all the possible facts about the person described, the writer must choose only those which are truly distinguishing. Thus, it should not be necessary for a student to write that the subject has two eyes, or two hands, or two feet. Such facts describe the characteristics of human beings, not of a single person. On the other hand, if the person being described has only one eye, or one leg, or three fingers on the left hand, such details would help the reader pick the person out of a crowd. In brief, the test to be applied to each detail is not just whether it is true of the person being described, but also whether it will help to distinguish the individual from other persons who are nearly alike. This point is important; you will want to work on it until you are certain that your students understand it.

The Assignment

Throughout their observations of their subjects, students should keep in mind all the items that have been discussed in class, calling upon their attempts to classify details to determine whether they are pertinent and whether the words they choose are precise and descriptive. The underlying purpose of every assignment in this book is to make the students more keenly aware of their environment and the people in it. We hope that students will become observant enough to discover things about even the most familiar elements in their environment and the people in it—things that they may have been unconscious of before.

Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to write an objective description of a person, concentrating on physical features and distinguishing characteristics that set the subject apart from all others;

2. that their purpose is to describe their subject so accurately and adequately that their reader can pick the described person out of a group, relying solely on the writer's description;

3. that every detail included in their theme should be appropriate for their purpose and should be as exact and objective as possible;

4. that their audience is the teacher.

The Actual Writing, Revision, and Evaluation

(See Theme 1.)

Sample Themes

We include here two themes that we would select for mimeographing or projection on the overhead for class discussion.

Theme A

Dad is rather short and fat. He has short fudge-brown hair which he wears with a short "fluff" on top. His greenish-grey eyes are sharp, and nothing, (not even my troublesome escapades) eludes his twenty-twenty vision. He talks with a short, snappy voice. He uses this for arguing, praising, or scolding. His voice has a trace of a Polish accent, and always sounds as if it had a cold.

One of his mannerisms is to fall asleep right in the middle of a gun-popping western, usually about the time the Indians attack the fort.

Of course, there are the shows which he thinks quite exciting, such as the eleven o'clock news. He "boos" the President and cheers for Senator Dole. Then he gives himself lectures on how the world should be run. These lectures sometimes include a person who happened to be traveling en route the living room to the kitchen for a snack in hopes of reaching the latter before the lecture began. These lectures usually take up one-half hour of Saturday Night Live.

Another mannerism is his walk. It's a shuffle-strut, as if he were ice-skating without ice.

My dad is American, but his parents are true blue Polish. When dad gets mad, he blurts out a string of Polish sayings such as, "Czet pra zut nia tzropsky!" He sometimes sings his favorite Polish song, "Oh, Zosia, come make pierogi." This he sings in his throaty voice and soon the people that have been in his company aren't in his company anymore.

But, Dad is serious-minded most of the time. This I realized when he once said to me, "This world can not be run on all humor and no work."

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THEME B

There is a man in the congregation of our church who is rather handsome. If you're the type that likes a man with the jowls of a hound dog. The exact reason for this condition is something of a mystery to me now, but when I was little, I thought it was due to his extremely high collars. He is a very religious man. When the "Gloria patri" begins, he jumps up as if to greet the Lord, or maybe it was just that his collar had too much starch. Concerning his age, I would guess he is about fifty-eight years old. His gaze is sometimes accentuated with half-glasses, which adds to his ruddy complexion. His iridescent silver hair acts as an elegant frame for his face. Five feet, eight inches is his complete height. For a man his age, he is very well built. There is no overhang around the belt, or flabbiness of the arm. His suits seem to be tailor made, instead of the regular men's store suit. The materials and accessories vary with the weather. For instance, in the summer one might see him wearing a gray and white seersucker suit with a straw hat and his umbrella. But in the winter time, one sees him in the finest black or charcoal wool suits and heavy overcoat, with a black hat. Along with these things, a brisk short stride accompanies him. This, then, is a picture of a man sitting in the congregation of our church.

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Sample Questions for Class Discussion

1. Which of the two themes gives you the better picture of the person being described? Why do you think so?

2. What additional details do you need to help you identify the subject in Theme A? in Theme B?

3. What details would not help you identify the subject in Theme A? in Theme B? Why?

4. Which of the two themes contains fewer opinions? What are the statements or words of opinion in each theme?

5. What words would you remove from Theme A? from Theme B? Why?

6. Did the writer of Theme A organize the facts about their subject to help the reader identify the person described? Of Theme B? Give reasons for your answers.

7. If you were evaluating these themes, what rating would you give each one? Why? What comments would you make on each theme?

Theme 4

The Writing Task

Students write an impressionistic or imaginative description of a real or fictitious person for a reader the same age as the writer.

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The students' purpose is not merely to give their readers enough information so that they can identify the subject described, but to select words and details that will make the reader feel a particular way about that person.

As the teacher, your purposes are

(1) to explain the differences between the objective description called for in Theme 5 and an impressionistic description,

(2) to help students find words and phrases that trigger emotive responses in a reader, and

(3) to continue sharpening the students' awareness of people around them.

Finding Information and Precise Words for an Audience

To explain to students how this theme differs from Theme 3, you might compare the purposes. For Theme 3, the purpose is to describe a person so accurately, adequately, and objectively that the reader can identify the person described even in a crowd. The task for Theme 4 is to help the reader see the person as the writer does and to make the reader feel about the person approximately the same as the writer does.

You should make it clear to students that they need not describe a real person in Theme 4. But this does not mean that the person should appear "unreal." The task is to describe a person who could be alive, not necessarily one who actually exists.

Since this task asks the student to make the reader feel a certain way about the person described, you should try to give students some idea of the range of feelings possible. For example, a person whom the students describe as being ugly might be presented as the object of our sympathy; the reader might come away from one description of such a person feeling very sorry for the person described. Another description of the same person, using many or all of the very same details, might cause the reader to dread them, to regard them as something loathsome. Still another description might induce the reader to laugh at them. The point is to help students understand that they can control their material, and thus control their readers' feelings about the persons described. This point is important; if it needs time and abundant illustration, you will want to take the time to find or invent appropriate examples.

Success in this task depends not only on the writer's ability to create a believable person, but also on the ability to create in the reader particular feelings about that person. When students have come to understand these two points, they are very likely to ask one or both of two very important questions. From the writer's point of view, they may ask, "How can the writer tell whether they have created just the feeling they intend?" And from the reader's or critic's point of view, "How can we know just how the writer means us to feel about this person?" Both of these questions are important; both deserve answers. You might say something like this: "We as readers can never know anything more than the writer tells us, nor can the writer know just what they have accomplished until we tell them. We can never tell whether what we feel is just what the writer intended; that aspect of their achievement the writer can judge only by seeing what readers make of what was written. As writers we can consider several ways of wording our material and choose that way which seems to us best. As readers we can tell whether the writing creates any feeling at all. We can testify as to the intensity or power of the feeling created in us. We can tell whether that feeling is consistently developed in the paper, and we can tell whether certain sentences seem to leave the feeling in doubt."

The process of finding information for describing a person for Theme 4 might be reviewed. For this theme, mannerisms will probably be most important, but the other headings should not be overlooked.

Obviously the major task here is finding the right words to create the intended feeling about the person described. You need to help students explore the possibilities. For example, one expression on a given face might be called "an angelic smile" or a "moronic grin." The same person might be described by two persons as "slim" and "skinny." We might describe a given a person's walk as "stately, regal," or we might say that the individual moves along like "a lopsided snowball rolling downhill." Each of these expressions carries with it certain obvious feelings. The point is that students need to learn how such expressions create feelings and thus learn to control language to their own advantage.

As students suggest phrases to be written on the chalkboard, you should watch for those which tell the reader how to feel. The writer's task is not, for example, to tell us to be afraid of a person, but to make us fear them. It is one thing to say "Albert is a jackass"; it is quite another thing to describe Albert's speaking voice as "braying."

This is a difficult assignment, but it is one for which students need little motivation and one that produced excellent results in the pilot schools.

The major problem for many students will be one of focus. Some students will write about their own reactions to the person they describe, rather than describing the person. By doing this, they tell the reader how they feel, but they do little to make the reader feel the same way. It is important for students to understand that the focus of their writing must be on the person they are describing; they are not to describe their reactions to that person or analyze their feelings about them. The writer's feelings will be implied in an effective theme, but they probably never need to be stated.

Perhaps sample themes from the previous assignment could be, at least partially, reworked during a class exercise to give students an objective demonstration of, and some practice in, manipulating language to achieve various effects. It is important that students understand that they need not be as objective in their use of language as they were in Theme 3; in fact, subjective writing is actually necessary to achieve the purpose of Theme 4.

The Assignment

Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to write an imaginative or impressionistic description of a real or fictitious person;
2. that their purpose is not merely to inform their reader, but to affect them; (The writer should seek to make the reader feel some particular way about the person described.)
3. that the method for finding information is the same as in Theme 3 but the words need to convey opinions—not facts;
4. that every detail should be as useful to the purpose and as exact as they can make it.

The Actual Writing, Revision, and Evaluation

(See Theme 1.)

Sample Themes

We have selected four themes from four different classes because we believe the themes illustrate not only what students are capable of writing but they also reflect, to some extent, the degree of help each student was given during class discussions and the actual writing.

Theme A

As I pass by the bus stop every day, I cannot help throw a glance in the direction of an old man. Not just any old man, but a special one, one I see just about every day.

He is always wearing blue jeans that have to be rolled up evidently to keep him from tripping over them. Occasionally he will wear a blue flannel shirt and old work shoes coated with mud.

He stands about five feet six inches tall when straightened out but he is usually hunched over. I have seldom seen him walk, but when he does, his step is hobbled by a limp in the right leg. His weight couldn't be over one hundred thirty-five pounds. His face contains deep set blue eyes which can be seen through old-fashioned frameless spectacles. His hair is grayish-white and his skin is wrinkled like it was too big for his bones. I think he is something like eighty-two years old because he reminds me of my grandfather.

I held his arm once to keep him from falling down. It felt strange; his skin was rough, dry, and scaly-a gift of age.

It was getting late so I kept on walking by him today. As I got away from him I turned to look back. His sloping shoulders swiveled in my direction. He had a smile on his face. My return smile was cold; it seemed funny smiling to . . . to him. So funny that I laughed a little and he chuckled a little at me too.

When I finally got home I really felt important. Because now we could both say to ourselves; I am a friend to him.

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Theme B

She walked down the street, and everyone stopped and watched. She wasn't young anymore, but she walked with the grace of an Amazon queen.

Her head was held back proudly and her back was straight. Yet, the years of toil are beginning to show. Every so often she slows down as if looking for the strength that is failing her.

Each person calls out hello and awaits her smile. The radiant smile is rarer now because the teeth she uses are no longer hers.

When you see her you forget the salt and pepper colored hair and remember only the black-haired beauty she must have been.

She has sparkling light brown eyes that glow with perception and sympathy. Most of the time they are now masked by the glasses she needs to see.

She is a disciplined lady who believes that gay clothes, fads and elaborate hairdos belong to youth. She is an immaculate person. She has to wash everything she uses.

When she talks one can catch a trace of the Southern Mississippi African American she used to be. The voice has been muted over the last 43 years so that now the voice talking becomes a lullaby.

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Theme C

On the street where I live, there is a lady sixty years old. Her husband died two years ago. Since then, she has lived alone. Her daughter and two grandchildren visit her from Arizona during the summer. She is very proud of the family she has left and always shows everyone on the block the grandkids latest pictures.

My neighbor is five feet three inches tall and heavier than the desired weight stated on the chart for height and weights. Since she is pleasingly plump, she wears dresses with high waists and jackets. She has hair the color of pewter sitting in the sunlight. It is short and curled close to her head, which never seems to get out of place. Her eyes are like blue sapphires. They are filled with bliss and contentment. She has distinctive round cheeks, velvety smooth and rosy with rouge. She uses cherry red lipstick blotted to give her lips a healthy, natural look. She has silvery blue glasses that she wears on a chain around her neck. When she talks she brightens ones day by her emphasis of words. She doesn't speak in a monotone.

Besides being an interesting speaker, she is interested in others problems. She will gaze into your eyes, filled with sympathy and understanding. She likes to take walks but she is deterred by arthritis of the hip. Her first few steps after she has been sitting are short and jerky as if she was trying to walk on a sprained ankle. As she walks there is a slight limp, but pain is never seen in her face.

She is active at her church and helps with the Cancer Drive, although she can not canvas door-to-door. Around Halloween she is the most active house on the block. Kids come from everywhere for her candy apples, brownies and cupcakes. In the summer, on hot afternoons she has pink lemonade for the kids hard at play. She tries to know everyone around. When there is sickness in the neighborhood, she sends food and I believe she knows everyone's birthday on the block. She keeps a diary and if one could read it, I think it would never be dull.

After her husband's death her daughter wanted her to move to Arizona, but she knew her daughter and family had their life to lead and she had to find a new one for herself. At first, she started sewing for people but her time became so filled with the welfare of others she did not need a pastime for herself. One thing I heard just this week is that she supports an orphan in Korea. I would never hear her tell this. As I look out my window she's coming up the street with two small packages. With a beaming smile upon her face she is walking to the bus station to meet her two grandchildren.

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Theme D

I usually see her when she walks from her house into the car, or from the car into her house. But I've heard much from neighborhood gossip about her which is not very complimentary.

Divorced twice she owns a nightclub and rarely remains at home with her three children who roam the neighborhood at their will. She lives in a small one story brick house which has a new coat of paint but the backyard is strewn with children's toys. Although I have never been inside the house I have heard from various authorities that satin chairs and velvet sofas decorate the interior of the house. The cars she drives are gifts supposedly from gentlemen friends.

One would never be able to recognize her by hair color as it is constantly changing and has been the unusual colors of pink and green. Always dressed in the flashiest of clothes, with the gait of one who is solely concerned in herself and one who has complete self assurance, she marches to her car throwing her two miniature French Poodles in she steams off. I don't know this woman personally but I can gather from observation she takes little interest in her home, children, or neighborhood.

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Sample Questions for Class Discussion

The series of questions numbered 1 can be asked about each of the four themes printed above.

1. Can you picture the person described? Why, or why not? How do you feel about the individual? What specific words, phrases, and sentences lead you to feel a certain way about the person described? What specific words, phrases, or sentences do you think are particularly effective? Why? What words, phrases, or sentences would you remove? Why? What additional information do you think you need to have a clearer picture of the person described or to have reason to feel a certain way about the individual? If you were evaluating this theme, how would you rate it? Why? What comments would you make that you think would be most useful to the writer?

2. Which of the four themes is the most effective? Why? Which is least effective? Why?

3. Does the writer of Theme D know the person being described? What advice would you give the writer about choosing people to describe?

CHAPTER 4:

The Audience Responds

THUS FAR WE HAVE SUGGESTED A SPECIFIC AUDIENCE FOR EACH THEME IN THIS sequence. We have further suggested that students read each theme to different people in the revision step so that they can discover the weaknesses in their paper and strengthen it before submitting it for your evaluation. The comments students received during the revision step were likely to sound something like these:

"It's good, because ..."

"I was not given enough information to picture the person you described."

"I don't like your theme because ..."

If they are sincere and explicit, such comments can help writers revise and improve their themes; otherwise, the comments are as worthless as a single-word comment of *good, trite*, or *poor*.

For the first two themes in this chapter, we ask the audience to respond in a different way. Instead of merely commenting on the information in the theme, the reader is asked to follow the directions of the writer. The first theme task calls for writers to give their readers specific directions for getting to the writers' homes; the second theme task asks writers to tell their readers exactly how to put something together or how to do something. For each theme, the writers should be able to tell from their readers attempts to follow directions whether or not they have communicated.

The third theme calls for a different kind of response since the audience is a child between the ages of three and seven. By reading their stories to children, the writers should be able to tell immediately whether or not they are communicating and whether their stories are interesting enough to hold children's attention. No reader is likely to be more honest in responding to a story than a child, and we have learned that if students actually read their stories to children, they are likely to learn more about what writing for an audience means than through any other method.

Theme 5

The Writing Task

Students write specific directions that will help an adult who has never been in the writer's neighborhood walk to their house, apartment, or farm from a place at least two miles from where the writer lives. (You should assign starting places that make it impossible for students simply to tell their readers to go down Elm Street until they get to 2615, or whatever the street address is.)

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The students' purpose is to give clear, precise directions to get to the writers' homes.

As the teacher, your purposes are:

(1) to help students analyze the route to their homes, selecting landmarks that will be of assistance to their readers;

(2) to help students write clear, precise directions that will not confuse their readers; and

(3) to teach students how to arrange their information in chronological order.

Preliminary Exercise

Before you assign this task, you might give students an opportunity to discover the problems that arise when they try to give someone directions. Without explanation, you might tell students that they are to write directions that will help a stranger get to the principal's office, the gymnasium, or the home economics room from the classroom you are in. The destination you select should be one that requires the writer to have the reader make several turns and go up or down at least one flight of steps (or go through several doors to an inner office).

If the school building itself does not provide sufficient navigational hazards to make this writing exercise worthwhile, you may want to have students direct the stranger from the school to some place in town. The destination should require directions complex enough to provide the students with a real challenge and to give you some examples of incomplete, inaccurate, overly simple, or unduly complex directions. If the exercise is too easy, students are likely to have problems with the actual theme assignment since they will tend to underestimate its difficulty.

The object of this preliminary exercise is neither to have the students write complete, perfect directions nor to prove that they cannot write. Rather, the purpose is to make students aware of some of the difficulties Theme 5 presents and to prepare them to solve the problems.

At the beginning of the period, you should tell students exactly what you want them to do and then give them about ten minutes to write the instructions. After you collect the directions, you may want to draw one at random from the stack. Before you read the directions aloud, you might ask a student to draw a floor plan of the school on the chalkboard, and then to insert arrows, showing the direction the stranger is to walk according to the instructions you read. (Several teachers reported that they asked a group of three or four students to collaborate on the drawing of the map. Teachers also reported that the ideal method for proving the accuracy of a set of directions is to take the class through the corridors as they read the directions.)

After you read several sets of directions, the class should consider the problems that each unidentified writer encountered and how well or how poorly the writer solved them. A comparison of several papers should alert students to the problems inherent in Theme 5 and should help them work toward solutions to the problems.

Students Draw Maps

After students have completed the preliminary exercise and after you have explained both the task and the purpose of Theme 5, you might ask them to draw a simple map of the most direct route from the assigned starting place to their homes. Reminding students that they will be giving readers only a verbal map of the territory, you might have students analyze their maps, while asking themselves questions like these:

1. Have I selected the easiest route from the starting place to my home? Are there some recognizable landmarks along the way that will help my readers find my home? Or should I select a different route because there are landmarks along it that strangers can't miss?

2. What is a landmark? Can it be a bakery? a filling station? a blue house with white trim? a vacant lot? If one of the landmarks is a bakery, should I give my readers the name of it—if the name can easily be seen on a building or a sign?

If one of the points where the readers are to turn is a filling station, should I give them the name of the station if there is more than one gas station along the route? What name should I give them? If I know the station as Johnson's 24-hour Service, will that name help my readers if it is painted only on a small sign above the door to the station? Or will Standard (or Chevron, or Shell, or Marathon) be of more help if Johnson has a large sign indicating the brand of gasoline sold?

3. If I tell my readers to turn left at the white house between Madison and Lincoln, will I give them sufficient directions? Will they turn at the white house by the alley between Madison and Lincoln if I give them no additional information? If I do not want them to turn left at the white house by the alley but at the white tri-level with the green roof on the corner of Lincoln and Whiteside, should I not give them such specific information?

4. Frequently, when strangers ask for directions, they are led astray because the person directing them relies on their own knowledge of an area. For example, a farmer might tell a stranger to "take the first road past the old Hanson farm" even though Hanson doesn't live there anymore and the name on the mailbox is Jones or Smith. To the farmer, that particular farm always has been, and always will be, known as "the Hanson farm." The farmer fails to take the stranger's lack of knowledge of the area into consideration as he gives directions.

How can I avoid using terms that will confuse strangers? For example, can I tell them to turn right at the portables, meaning temporary classrooms, or should I use another term that might be more familiar to them than portables?

5. After I have chosen the route and selected easily recognizable landmarks, what should I tell my reader to do first? What next? Why must I be careful in organizing my directions? How can I make the directions clear besides just writing something like this: "First, you walk five blocks from the corner of Main and Walnut, and then you turn right at the green house at the corner of third and Jefferson, and then you, and then you ..."?

As they analyze their maps, students should think of additional questions they need to ask to gather information that will help them write clear, specific directions. As they analyze the maps, you need to remind them that for this assignment they will not give their readers maps, only written directions. However, you might ask students to hand in their maps with the themes to help you evaluate the directions.

Each student should understand that a good theme is one that gives their readers clear, precise directions to get to their homes. A poor theme is one that confuses readers because of imprecise language, lack of sufficient detail, or faulty directions.

The Assignment

Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to write clear, specific directions that will help their reader, a stranger in town, walk from a specific starting place to their home;

2. that they must choose every word carefully and make certain that their reader will readily understand it;

3. that they must organize their information so readers can follow it without becoming confused;

4. that they should leave out all extraneous details, no matter how interesting they may be or how much they reveal about the community's history.

The Actual Writing, Revision, and Evaluation

(See Themes 1 through 4.)

Sample Themes

(See Themes 1 through 4.)

As students examine several particularly accurate sets of directions that you have selected for class discussion, you might ask them how they would alter the directions if the reader were driving to the writer's home instead of walking. Through discussion, students should conclude that the directions given drivers need to be much simpler than those given to walkers, and the landmarks cited need to be ones that drivers can see quickly and easily without taking their eyes off the road too long.

Theme 6

The Writing Task

Students give their readers directions for putting something together or for doing something like baking a cake, playing badminton, or fly fishing.

[NOTE : The processes chosen, whether by you or by students, should be fairly simple ones that lend themselves to verbal explanation and that the writers can treat adequately in two to three hundred words. It is not uncommon to find an assignment like "Explain how to tie a bow knot in a shoelace." That seems a simple task, but it is actually very difficult to explain in writing. Therefore, you should help students choose processes that they can perform themselves and that are not impossible to describe in words without diagrams and drawings.]

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The students' purposes are:

(1) to write clear, specific instructions that will enable their readers to perform the process described; and

(2) to explain any terms that they think their readers may not know. (For this task, we suggest that you tell girls to write their directions for the boys in the class, and that you tell boys to write their directions for the girls in the class. If it is an all male or all female class, tell the students to write for a member of the opposite sex and suggest they read the directions to such a person before they hand in their papers. Thus, it may be necessary for the writers to explain terms

like baste, parboil, Phillips screwdriver, and socket wrench. We fully realize that in today's society that boys may understand far more about cooking and baking than was once supposed and that girls may know a great deal about mechanics, woodworking, and tools.)

As the teacher, your purposes are:

(1) to help students understand why clear, specific instructions are important;

(2) to help students learn how to use metaphorical descriptions to help their readers identify objects and procedures for which they do not know the technical names; and

(3) to continue helping them organize their information in chronological order.

Preliminary Exercise

We have used this preliminary exercise in our own classes, in demonstration classes, and in pilot-school classes as the first part of Finding Information and Precise Words for an Audience. In almost every instance, students have insisted after this exercise that they be given another chance to prove that they can write clear directions; therefore, we will attempt to describe the exercise here as we have used it.

At the beginning of a class period, we ask students about the experiences they have had with printed directions for, say, putting toys together, for baking cakes, or for installing a CD-ROM in the computer. In a few minutes of discussion, we hope that students will tell us why many printed directions are unclear, confusing, or inadequate.

Then we begin removing the pieces of a meat grinder from a paper sack, piece by piece. We do not tell students that each piece is a part of a meat grinder. Instead, we ask them to tell us what the piece looks like. If a student knows the technical name for the piece, we accept it, but we continue to ask other students what the piece looks like, noting that not all people know the technical names for every part of every object in the world. Since our readers may not know the names of the parts, we can help them identify the objects by telling them what they look like. We do not explain metaphorical comparisons during this exercise; instead, we elicit similes from students by asking them to tell us what each part of the meat grinder looks like.

As we remove each part from the sack, we suggest that students make notes, jotting down a word or two or several phrases that tell what the piece looks like. We further suggest that they note the technical name for the part, but only if a student has given us the technical term. We do not provide such information in the demonstration.

After we have displayed all the parts of the meat grinder, we tell students that we will now assemble it, slowly and deliberately, while they make notes that will help them write directions for putting the meat grinder together. We tell them that they will write the directions immediately after we assemble the meat grinder. We note that the

reader who will put the gadget together is either a student we have excused from the class at the beginning of the hour, or a teacher or administrator who has not been in the classroom during the demonstration.

While assembling the meat grinder, we make certain that every student in the class can see exactly what we are doing, and we also allow enough time between each step in the process to let students make notes.

After we have assembled the meat grinder, we give students two or three minutes to look at it and ask questions about any step in the assembly, or about any part of the gadget. Then we disassemble it, leaving the pieces on a desk or table so that students can examine them if they wish. However, we do not let any student try to put the grinder together at this time.

We give students about ten minutes to write the directions. In most cases, this has been ample time. Normally, we do not like to set a time limit on any writing, but in this case we want students to write the directions before the end of the period. This is so we can read three or four sets of directions while our designated performer tries to put the grinder together.

After collecting the papers, we call the performer into the classroom, explain the task to them, and have them draw one paper from the stack. Then we read the directions slowly, asking the performer to do *exactly* what the writer has written—and nothing more. We continue reading until the meat grinder is assembled or until it is quite obvious that it can't be put together if the reader follows the directions given. If the instructions are not clear, we ask the performer to draw another paper, which we read as they try to follow the directions.

We have taken four or five hundred students through this exercise as well as several hundred adults: only seven times was the meat grinder assembled successfully. We are happy when it is not put together because the students demand another chance. Many see where they went wrong, and they want to try again. In demonstration class after demonstration class, students at all grade levels asked their teacher to bring a different gadget to the class the next day so that they could try again to prove they can write clear directions.

Any machine that has between five to ten working parts and that can be assembled in four to eight steps can be substituted for the meat grinder. The only requirements are that the machine and its parts are large enough so that all students can easily see it being assembled and that the process of putting it together is not too complicated for students to describe.

The purpose of this exercise is not to prove to students that they cannot write. Rather, it is to motivate them to write clearly and accurately, describing processes in precise words that readers can understand.

Finding Information and Precise Words for an Audience

If you have given students a preliminary exercise like the one suggested above, you need only remind them that they are to choose a process that they are to explain to a reader of the opposite sex. Therefore, they need to do the following:

1. Examine every part of the object they will put together, carefully noting the name of each part and making certain that the reader can pick out each part either with the help of a precise word or a descriptive phrase or sentence.

   Or

   Examine every step in a process like baking a cake or repairing a bicycle chain, making certain they can explain each step in terms that their readers can understand, and making certain they describe the tools or the cooking or sewing terms involved in the process so that their readers will know exactly what they are to do and what implements and/or ingredients they are to use.

2. Take their readers through each step in the process by organizing their directions in chronological order.

3. Don't assume anything about the reader's knowledge of the process. Be clear, precise, and specific down to the smallest and most obvious detail.

You will want to approve the process that each student selects before they begin writing. If the process involves putting something together, the thing to be put together should have at least five parts, requiring at least four steps for assembly; otherwise, the writer will not be challenged. On the other hand, the thing to be put together should not have so many parts and involve so many steps that the writer cannot handle it adequately in two to three hundred words.

If writers elect to tell their readers how to do something, you will want to make certain that the process is not too complicated, but complex enough to present a challenge to the writer.

The Assignment

Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to tell their readers how to do something or how to put something together;

2. that their purpose is to explain the process to their reader so clearly and accurately that the reader will be able to follow the directions;

3. that their reader is the same age as the writer and is a member of the opposite sex;

4. that a good theme is one that gives their readers sufficient information and an adequate explanation of terms, enabling their readers to follow the instructions.

The Actual Writing

(See Theme 1.)

Revision

(See Theme 1.)

During this step, you will want to give students an opportunity to read the directions to a member of the opposite sex so that they can discover which terms need to be explained more thoroughly.

Evaluation and Sample Themes

(See Themes 1 through 4.)

Theme 7

The Writing Task

Students write stories for children between the ages of three and seven.

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The student's purpose is to create a story that will entertain a child between the ages of three and seven. Their purpose is not to create a great story—one that can be published. Rather, their purpose is to write a story that will entertain a child, using language that the child can understand.

As the teacher, your purposes are:

(1) to give students additional experience in narrative writing by letting them write stories for children;

(2) to help students understand the elements of a story; and

(3) to continue showing them how consideration of an audience affects their prose.

Finding Information and Precise Words for an Audience

You might begin by saying: "Thus far you have described people, your neighborhoods, and an action (the process theme). Those are three elements of a story—characters, setting, and action. Of course the action in a story is much different from the action you described in telling your reader how to put something together. In what ways do the actions differ? How are they similar? In what ways do your descriptions of people differ from those in stories? How are they similar? In what ways do your descriptions of your neighborhood differ from descriptions in stories? How are they similar?

"Now we are going to draw upon your previous writing experiences to tell a story. Each of you has probably had the experience of trying to amuse a child. Some of you have little brothers and sisters; others have jobs as baby sitters. Your task now is to make up a story that will entertain a child between the ages of three and seven. How do you go about it?"

During the discussion students should consider the kinds of stories that amuse children. They should quickly analyze some of the stories they know, paying particular attention to the story line, characterization, setting, conflict, and action. They should be led to see that the lengthy descriptions they wrote in earlier assignments are not always appropriate in a story for children. How do the authors of children's stories describe their characters? What does the reader learn about characters through their actions? What descriptive words are used? (In describing people, students were cautioned against using words like big, little, tall, short, ugly, and beautiful. Do the writers of children's stories use such words? Why?)

After the discussion of the elements in stories for children, you might explain that the task is to write a story that will amuse children between the ages of three and seven. You might suggest that students read their stories to children before handing in their papers. The children's reactions to the stories should indicate to the writers whether or not they have been successful. The writers should also learn, from the point of view of the child, what words they need to change, and they should be able to explain why the changes are necessary.

Students should understand that they are not attempting to write a story for publication—but a story whose sole purpose is to entertain children. They should also understand that their ability to communicate with children is more important than their talent for creating a first-rate story.

The problem of finding the matter and the words for this theme is much more complex than for previous ones. First, students need to decide on their stories. They need to ask themselves such questions as "What happens to whom and why?" They need to decide how involved they can make their stories for their audience. After they have decided upon the stories, they need to decide how to describe their characters.

(Of course, there are other ways to begin, and you will not want to discourage alternative ways to build stories.) How much detail is necessary? How can the details be worked into the story? What descriptive words are appropriate for children? Students also need to decide on the setting and the amount of detail needed. They further need to decide what the action or conflict is and how they can best recount it to interest their audience.

One of the major purposes of this assignment is to make young writers more aware of their audience. Therefore, you should stress, as students discuss the problems of creating a story and using language a child understands, that they need to have conversations with children before they can decide on appropriate words and before they decide what kinds of stories interest children.

The Assignment

Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to write a story for children between the ages of three and seven;

2. that their purpose is to tell a story that will entertain children and that they are to write in language that children can understand;

3. that the questions they ask to help them create a story must include questions about characters, setting, conflict, and action;

4. that they are to read their rough drafts to children so that they can learn what revisions are necessary from the point of view of the children;

5. that their ability to communicate with children—not their talent to create an excellent story—is the major item to be evaluated by the teacher.

The Actual Writing

(See Theme 1.) We strongly recommend that you give students time to write their entire stories in class to prevent plagiarism.

Revision

(See Theme 1.) Students should also be required to read their stories to children before they revise them.

Evaluation

(See Theme 1.) This theme should produce some of the finest writing that many of the students have ever done. Several teachers have reported that students become especially excited by this assignment and, given sufficient help and preparation, they will write imaginative stories in fresh, crisp prose.

Some clever students, realizing that it is impossible for any teacher to know all of the published stories for children, might be tempted to plagiarize a copyrighted story. A student who hands in a properly punctuated paper, for instance, and who has never done so before might be quietly investigated, but this must be done with great tact. This is especially important since many students will write far better than they have done before and the work will be their own. A teacher who might accuse such an innocent student of cheating could harm the student irreparably.

We do not advise that you even discuss the subject of plagiarism during this assignment; we mention it only because it did happen in a few classes and also because many teachers might mistakenly suspect some papers because they are so far superior to previous performances. With positive instruction in the previous themes, by the time students get to this assignment their attitude should probably be such that this problem will be nonexistent or limited to very isolated cases.

Sample Themes

We received many excellent stories; however, we decided against printing any here because of the problem described in *Evaluation*. This is not to say that we doubt the integrity of the young writers; we simply do not want to run the risk of embarrassing students by publishing a story that may not be all theirs.

Chapter 5:

Examining Events

THE THREE TASKS IN THIS CHAPTER ASK STUDENTS TO EXAMINE EVENTS OR INCIDENTS IN their lives, to explain why one of them is significant, and then to describe a different event, incident, or argument first objectively and then subjectively.

Theme 8

The Writing Task

The student is to describe an event, a series of incidents, or an argument in such a way that the reader knows it is particularly significant to the writer.

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The students' purpose is to describe an event in their lives that they think is significant and to relate it in such a way that their reader—a person their own age—can understand why the event is significant without being told that it is.

As the teacher, your purposes are:

(1) to give students additional experience in narrative writing by having them describe a significant experience; and

(2) to help students examine significant experiences in their lives.

Finding Information and Precise Words

You might begin by saying something like this: "For your last writing assignment you were asked to make up a story for children. For this writing assignment you are to tell a story—but this time a true one. What we are going to do now is consider a series of incidents, an event, or an argument that you think is significant. You are to pick out one thing that has happened to you that you think is very important or that might even have changed your life. Your purpose for writing is to tell your readers exactly what happened, starting at the beginning and giving them the appropriate details. You are to describe the event so vividly that your readers can tell immediately that it made an impact on your life and they can determine why it did. In telling about the event, you will need to give your readers some description of the characters involved, of their actions, and of their reactions—if there were reactions to the event. You might also need to record some of the conversation, if that seems pertinent.

You might say something like this: "A good theme is one that adequately describes the event and persuades readers that it was significant without telling them that it was significant. A poor theme is one that does not give readers sufficient information to persuade them that the event was important, or one that does not provide enough information for them to understand exactly what happened."

Students should understand at the outset that in describing the event or argument they must use words that will help the reader infer the significance of the described incident. But they should also understand that words like *significant* or phrases like *made a great impact on me* are not appropriate for this theme. Readers must be persuaded from what they read that the event was *significant* or *made a great impact on the writer;* the writer should not merely tell the reader that.

Suggested Questions

The first task of the students is to select the event that is important. They must ask themselves questions like these:

1. Have I ever been involved in an event, an incident, or an argument that has been very important to me?
2. Why was it important?
3. What actually happened?
4. What did I learn from it?
5. Did it change my life? If so, how?
6. Did it change my attitude toward people? If so, how?

7. Did it affect others? If so, whom did it affect? Why did it affect them?

8. Did it change my behavior? If so, how?

9. Can I show my readers, by describing the event, incident, or argument, why it was important and how it changed my life?

When we speak of a significant event, we are not necessarily referring to something catastrophic. Because some students may think this is what we are talking about, they may have trouble getting started. You may want to point out that there are many events in everyone's life that are extremely significant even though students may not think of them when you begin discussing this theme task. For instance:

1. the first day of school, or the first day at a new school;

2. for boys, the first haircut; for girls, the first trip to a hair stylist;

3. the day the student joined the Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts, or similar organization;

4. the student's first Communion or confirmation or bar mitzvah;

5. tryouts for an athletic team or a cheerleading team or a debate team;

6. a failing or bad grade on a report card;

7. the student's first date or big dance;

8. the birth of a younger brother or sister;

9. the wedding of an older brother or sister or close friend;

10. the meeting or losing of a good friend;

11. the student's first airplane ride;

12. a trip to the hospital, or to the doctor's or dentist's office;

13. the day the student's father or older brother went to one of the armed forces or returned from service;

14. the day the student had a fight or an argument with a friend;

You should point out that many of the events mentioned above may seem silly or trivial now, but at the time one occurred, the writers may well have considered it the most important thing in their lives. The problem for students is to be able to convey their feelings at the time of the event so that their readers are persuaded the incident was significant for the writer, at least at the time it occurred.

A student who can recreate in writing the fears, anxieties, and tribulations that precede the first trip to the barber shop will have written about something which many little boys face. The writer may even discover why such a common, ordinary event seems threatening to a little boy. Frequently, students will discover that what precedes or follows the event is what is finally most significant: the haircut itself is not half so bad as the anxiety that precedes it. The fights between friends are frequently stupid and silly, but the results can be extremely important and have far-reaching effects upon a person's life.

Again, in this assignment we ask students to examine their experiences and then to write about them in such a way that their readers can feel about the experiences approximately the same as the writers do. The readers should also be able to understand why the event described was significant to the writer.

For a great many students this assignment will provide a positive emotional outlet that has not previously been available to them in confronting an experience. In the pilot schools, several students wrote exceptionally powerful papers about very significant events in their lives. We hope that students realize that their ability to confront and write about an important event in their lives can be meaningful not only to them but to the readers of the paper as well. We would therefore hope that all students will be eager to share their papers with their fellow students. However, because many of the experiences that will be chosen for this assignment tend to be very personal, the teacher may find it necessary to assure students that their papers will not be used as sample themes for class discussion if they would be embarrassed by having other people read their papers. This may mean that some of the best papers will not be available for the class to see, but this will have to be the case if it means that the students will not be able to write honestly if they fear public reading of their themes. If the significance of writing, the importance of honesty, and the appreciation of what good writing is have been established and developed during the previous writing assignment, most students will not use the above situation as a dodge; rather, most will be proud to have their papers used as examples of good writing. You should make it clear to all students that their wishes will be respected in any case.

Two of the most powerful themes we have ever read cannot be published in this book even though we are not disclosing the names of the writers. Both themes were written in a class taught by a teacher whose students are never afraid to discuss their problems with her. They know they can talk with her or write about anything so long as they do so honestly, sincerely, and tactfully. Her students are not afraid to discuss some personal problems even in class because the atmosphere is such that they know they will not be jeered or embarrassed. A similar atmosphere needs to be created in any classroom for students to be able to write honestly on this and other assignments in this sequence.

One of the most common and persistent problems for many writers of this theme is the tendency toward overt moralization or didacticism. It is here again that a discussion of emotional control and distance would be desirable during the presentation of the theme assignment. Further, students should be helped to see that they must make the reader experience the event and its significance; the writers must avoid merely telling the readers that the event was significant through a series of true confessions or preachments. To achieve the purpose of the assignment, the papers must render dramatically both the experience and the feelings of the writer. The reader must be made to experience the event themselves; they must not merely be told that the event was significant.

A discussion of these two themes should help students discover the difference between merely telling the reader and actually showing them what happened.

Theme A

To an eight-year-old boy, having ten dollars is exciting at first, but it might turn into a disaster. This money is very likely to become a disaster if it is taken from his father's wallet.

Most children have often heard their parents tell them right from wrong. The child doesn't understand that he must use this knowledge to equip himself to participate and live more effectively in his parent's world, as well as all the areas of the more adult world ahead off him. But even more important is the problem to resist the urge to follow the crowd when he feels they are wrong. Although my friends knew it was wrong, they led me on to believe taking money was right. I took it. It was a disaster.

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Theme B

It all began when my gang and I were throwing snowballs one Tuesday night. We stood at the entrance to an alley and threw at almost every car that passed. Bobby, the biggest and clumsiest of the group, decided to put rocks in his snowballs; so we all tried it. We broke out eight bus windows and two car windows.

It was almost ten o'clock now and two boys had to be home at 10:15. One of them pleaded, "That's enough for tonight. Let's break." But I felt that my fun wasn't quite over. I had to throw just one more. As the rest of the gang began to leave, I threw my last snowball at the window of a car which was streaking by. The driver stopped the car and backed up. Each one of us ran in a different direction, except Bobby, who slipped and fell.

When I was far enough fro.n the scene, I glanced back and saw the man helping Bobby into his car. The man was a policeman.

After I reached home I immediately fell on my bed. My hands trembled; my heart beat furiously; sweat dripped from my face like water drips from a leaky roof. Nervousness increased as I thought about what Dad might do to me. The phone rang; my heart jumped. I thought maybe it was the police calling to report the incident to my parents, but when I picked up the receiver, I found that it was only Aunt May.

While I was getting ready for bed, I heard a knock at the door; my heart jumped again. This time it was only my brother. Going to sleep seemed impossible, so I got up and turned on the radio.

The next morning, I could not concentrate or study during the first four periods of school. My heart leaped again as a voice blasted over the intercom system, "Will you please send _____ to my office immediately. Thank you!" I sauntered out of the room and down to the principal's office where I found the remainder of the gang. The principal explained to us the damages we had caused and the fines we had to pay. Each of us had to pay twenty dollars for the car damages and fifty dollars for the bus damages. When he had finished his lecture, we walked shamefully from his office and back to our classes.

Now I felt that all of my troubles were over, but when I got home Mom and Dad awaited me with "the strap." Although this punishment only lasted fifteen minutes, it is the one which I will never, never, never forget.

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The writer of Theme B succeeds in achieving his purpose; the writer of Theme A does not. From a discussion of papers like these, you can help students appreciate the kinds of things their writing must do to help a reader understand how and why the event described was significant to the writer.

The Assignment

Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to describe an event, a series of incidents, or an argument that is particularly significant in their life;
2. that they are to describe that event and their reactions to it so clearly that their reader will understand why the event is particularly significant;
3. that they are to persuade their reader that the event is significant without saying that it is.

The Actual Writing

(See Theme 1.)

Revision

(See Theme 1.)

Evaluation

(See *Sample Themes* in Theme 1 and *Evaluation* in Theme 5.)

Sample Themes

(See previous themes.)

Theme 9

Students write, as objectively as possible, reports of an incident or an argument in which they became emotionally involved. Their reader is the teacher.

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The students' purpose is to report objectively an incident in which they were emotionally involved.

As the teacher, your purposes are:

(1) to remind students how to report facts, not opinions;

(2) to continue helping students examine their worlds; and

(3) to help students learn how to report an event in chronological order.

Finding Information and Precise Words

You should explain to students that their task is to write, as objectively as possible, a report of an incident that they witnessed or in which they were involved, or an argument in which they were emotionally involved. They are to report the incident from beginning to end, giving a thorough account of the incident without injecting personal opinions or emotions.

A good theme is one that describes the incident or argument dispassionately. The readers (peers for the revision as well as you as the final reader) should not be led to feel a particular way about the characters involved in the incident or argument because of the writer's use of language. Instead, a good theme is one that gives readers a complete picture of the incident or argument and lets them make up their own minds as to who might have been right or wrong. A poor theme is one in which the writers express their own opinions through their choice of words or through their careful selection of details that give the reader only the writers' picture of the incident or their version of the argument.

You might need to devote at least a part of one class period to helping students select an incident or an argument in which they were emotionally involved. You should point out that the incident or argument should be one that the student can describe from beginning to end.

Suggested Questions

Some sample questions for finding information to include in the theme follow:

1. Who was involved? How can I describe the actors objectively?
2. What happened? What are the facts of the situation?
3. When did it happen?
4. Where did it happen?
5. Why did it happen? Do I know, or am I guessing?
6. How did it happen? Can I tell what happened factually?

You might point out to students that these same questions are those that reporters ask when they gather information for a story. You might also note that if reporters cannot find complete answers to those questions, they may, either intentionally or unintentionally, give their readers a distorted picture of the event or incident, depending on the nature of the event and the professional and ethical standards of the reporter.

Examining the Language of Fact and Opinion

After you have helped students select an incident or argument that they can report, you should remind them of the differences between the language of fact and the language of opinion. For example, you might write sets of sentences like these on the chalkboard:

1. (a) A large crowd listened in awe as Senator Feinstein.

   (b) Approximately two hundred people listened to Senator Feinstein.

2. (a) He is a fool.

   (b) He is a daredevil.

   (c) She rides a motorcycle at 75 miles per hour.

   (d) She rides her motorcycle too fast.

3. (a) He is six feet tall and weighs 150 pounds.

   (b) He has an average build.

   (c) He is tall and skinny.

   (d) He is slim.

4. (a) He is plump.

   (b) He is five feet tall and weighs 130 pounds.

   (c) He is squat and fat.

   (d) He is short and chubby.

5. (a) The Dallas Cowboys beat the Pittsburgh Steelers in the Super Bowl of 1995.

   (b) The Dallas Cowboys had a much better team in 1995 than the Pittsburgh Steelers.

   (c) The underdogs lost to the favorites in the 1995 Super Bowl.

6. (a) The woman moved gracefully across the room.

   (b) The woman lumbered across the room.

   (c) The woman strode across the room.

   (d) The woman walked across the room.

Students should be asked to analyze each set of statements to determine which are written in the language of fact and which contain the language of opinion. In the statements of opinion, what words make these sentences statements of opinion? After analyzing the above sets, how would students define a factual statement? From the analysis of the above sets, how would they define a statement of opinion?

In the first set, for instance, the students should discover that "a large crowd" is never strictly a factual statement and should be avoided in factual writing. *Crowd* itself is a word which expresses an opinion. *Large* is a relative term that people use to describe almost any event if the place in which it is held is full or nearly full. For instance, at most high schools, 5,000 spectators at a basketball or football game could be considered a "large crowd." But at the final game for the championship of a major league sport, such as professional baseball or football, 5,000 would not be considered a large crowd. If a student speaker drew 300 adults to a high school convocation, the reporter might justifiably report that a large crowd was in attendance. (They would, of course, be more accurate if they reported the number.) However, if the President of the United States drew only 300 people to a major address at a large auditorium, the reporter would not be justified in calling it a large crowd. Where head counts are not available, it will be necessary, frequently, for the reporter to estimate the crowd's size or to use a word such as large or small to indicate how many people were there. Once again, however, it is important that the reporter give readers all the information necessary to allow them to make their own judgment about the relative size of the

crowd. As a writer on an assignment like this, the student must be careful to make their statements in relation to the elements that make up the event if they are to write objectively and accurately.

The Assignment

Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to report, as objectively as possible, an incident or argument in which they were emotionally involved;

2. that they are to give a full report of the incident or argument without expressing their own opinion in any part of the report;

3. that if they leave out important details in the report, they might be guilty of intruding their own opinion on the report since they might color the story by not giving a full account.

The Actual Writing and So Forth

(See Themes 1 through 4.)

Sample Themes

For this assignment and the next one, we believe that you should select a very good and a fair theme for class study. Students need to study the sample themes for this assignment before they write Theme 10. We suggest that you copy the sample themes so that students can study them carefully.

Theme 10

The Writing Task

Students write a subjective report of the incident described in Theme 9.

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The students' purpose is to describe an incident subjectively, choosing words and details that will make their readers feel approximately the same way about the event as the writers do.

As the teacher, your purposes are:

(1) to give students additional experience in controlling language and in writing to affect a reader in a specific way:

(2) to give them additional experience in distinguishing between the language of fact and the language of opinion; and

(3) to show students how they can manipulate facts by emphasizing certain details or by leaving details out of a report.

Finding Information and Precise Words

You might begin by saying something like this: "For your last writing assignment you were asked to describe, as objectively as possible, an incident or an argument in which you were emotionally involved. At that time you were told that you were not to express your opinions of the actions or of the characters involved. Now you are to take the same event and retell it, expressing your opinions and showing your emotional involvement throughout your account."

In the discussion that follows, you should make certain that students understand that they can affect the reader by using charged language and by distorting the truth—by leaving out certain details or by emphasizing certain details. They should understand that, in this case, a good theme is one which does persuade the reader to feel the same way about the incident as the writer does. A poor theme does not make the reader feel approximately the same way the writer does.

You can help students find the matter and the words for this particular theme by mimeographing one or two themes from the last assignment and having students examine them carefully, noting how they can change the themes from factual and objective to slanted and subjective. Students should be asked to examine each sentence in each theme, making appropriate changes where possible to affect the reader. However, students should be led to discuss how a reader might react if they insert too much opinion or if they flagrantly distort facts. It is important that students realize that a subtle approach is frequently more effective than one which is overtly propagandistic.

A line-by-line analysis of a theme from the last assignment should help students find the matter and the words for their own writing.

The Assignment

Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to rewrite the report that they prepared for Theme 9, being as subjective as possible and even distorting the report, if they so choose, by leaving out some of the facts or by adding information;

2. that they are to use the language of opinion wherever possible, and *not* language of fact;

3. that their purpose is to persuade their reader to feel the same way about the incident or argument as they do.

The Actual Writing and So Forth

(See Theme 1 through 4.)

Sample Themes

We read several dozen powerful evocative themes, most of which were painfully personal. Students' first brush with the death of a friend or relative was the dominant topic. We choose not to publish any of the themes here, and we urge caution in the study of sample themes written in your classes. Students may not wish to share what they have written, and we were told that the study of some themes provoked tears, sobs, and other expressions of sorrow that students said stayed with them throughout the day.

CHAPTER 6:
Defining Words

IN THE LATE '60S, STUDENTS PROTESTED AGAINST THE *ESTABLISHMENT*, AND SOME ADULTS dismissed the protesters, paying little attention to the arguments of the young because they were *hippies*. Many young people talked about a new *life style*, while some adults bemoaned the *generation gap*. Newspaper and magazine articles, books, conversations, and speeches were filled with words and phrases like the *establishment, life style, generation gap, the new left, liberal, conservative, moderate, hippie*, and *yippie*. In many instances, the writers and speakers, regardless of their ages, used the words and phrases as if each referred to some specific concept, ideology, or group, and in so doing, frequently failed to communicate with either side of the so-called generation gap.

Today there is a whole new set of terms. We talk about the gender gap, the yuppies, and generation X. We read about the activities of Secular Humanists, New Agers, and the New Religious Right. It is not uncommon to hear people talk about the current -isms: feminism, globalism, ageism, sexism, racism, and vegetarianism. We tend to label new movements, both new and old ideas, and beliefs. This is nothing new; human beings have been doing it since the beginning of recorded history—if not long before. Labels have been with us for thousands of years, and they will persist far into the millennium, but the trouble with them is that they all-too-frequently substitute a word or phrase for profound thought.

As you know so well, it is difficult to define an abstract term like the *new left, lifestyle, conservative, liberal,* and *moderate*. Yet many people sprinkle their conversations and their writings with such terms, failing to define the words as they want them to mean because they apparently think that each has a fixed referent. Or they use the terms as labels, dismissing, as they did in the sixties, any argument from young protesters because they must be *hippies*, or ignoring statements from anyone *over thirty* because they are issued by *the establishment*.

Descriptive Definitions Are Frequently Needed

To understand what writers or speakers mean by *the New Religious Right, the New Age religion,* or *secular humanism,* we need a definition of the words as they use them. Otherwise, we fail to understand completely the message they are sending. Yet, few of us pause long enough in our reading or listening to wonder what writers or speakers mean when they use such terms. Instead, we rely on our own definitions, thinking, perhaps, that the speakers or writers' meanings for a term is the same as ours. Thus, communication is imperfect or breaks down completely.

The words we have italicized thus far in this chapter are not the only abstractions that cry out for descriptive definitions in writing. Words like *love, loyalty, freedom, affluence,* and *courage* frequently misinterpreted by readers and listeners because the writers or speakers have not given a clear notion of what they mean when they use one of those abstractions.

Take the word *love*, for example. People around the world say or write that word or its equivalent in hundreds of languages every day. How many meanings can that word carry? Here are only a few:

love between mother and child

love for a sister or brother

love for a wife or husband

love for a bride-to-be and her fiance

brotherly love

love for country

love of wealth or material possessions

We could add many more examples to the list. Each implies a different kind of love, yet only one little four-letter word is used to express dozens of different emotions. A young college student told the senior author of this book that he "went ape" when a coed at another college ended her letter to him with the complimentary close: *Love, Samia*. He thought she was serious, and he set out to date her as often as he could, with a proposal in mind. He was devastated when he learned that she closed all of her letters: *Love, Samia*.

In this chapter, we continue to focus on the words we use in our writing. In the two assignments explained here, we ask students to define an abstract term and then apply an abstraction like *rich* or *wealthy* to a person who does not have a great deal of money. By so doing, we hope to help students better understand the wide range of meanings that people give to words, to help them understand the need to define terms they use, and to help them use abstractions more concretely in writing.

Theme 9

The Writing Task

Students define a word like *freedom, affluence, love, pride, status, power, yuppies, liberal, moderate,* or *conservative.* Or they define a phrase like *generation X, New Ager, secular humanist,* or *supply side economics.* The writers select the abstractions they wish to define.

The Writers' and Teacher's Purpose

The students' purpose is to define an abstract word so adequately that their reader, the teacher, will understand the range of meaning that the writers attach to specific abstract words.

As the teacher, your purposes are:

(1) to give students experience in defining terms much more thoroughly than a lexicographer can define them in a dictionary;

(2) to help students understand the differences between a lexical definition of an abstract word and the definition they give to the word; and

(3) to remind students that a word does not have a set meaning—people give meanings, sometimes many different meanings, to a word.

Finding Information and Precise Words for an Audience

You might point out to students that their task for this assignment is to write as complete a definition as possible of a word such as *freedom, affluence, love, pride,* or *status.* Or they can define a phrase like *generation X, New Ager, secular humanist,* or *supply side economics.* A single sentence definition is not sufficient since the task is to have students write definitions that enable their readers to know exactly what the writers mean when they use a certain word. They need to ask themselves a number of questions about the word they choose, attempting to find all of the shades of meaning that it has for them as well as to determine its denotative meanings.

This is a most demanding writing assignment. It is extremely difficult for anyone to define a word that does not have objective, physical referents. Yet, the ideas, feelings, and emotions that are most significant in our lives are conveyed through words that have no single physical referent. Many of the concepts that abstract words designate exist only in the minds of human beings. Hence, everyone who uses such words as *freedom, rich,* or *love* has slightly different notions about what those words mean. It is not uncommon to find people who do not know exactly what they mean when

they use many abstract words. In spite of this, we frequently act as if we are talking about exactly the same thing when we use such words. We assume we know what words mean when we sometimes don't; we even fight wars over ideologies, yet we are hard- pressed to tell another person in any specific way what it is we are fighting for or against.

It is important that we understand what we are really asking a student to do when we ask them to define an abstract term. We suggest that you choose a group, or groups of words, which your students think they know. We further suggest that the terms be written on the chalkboard one at a time and defined, by students, before the next word is written and defined. During the defining, we hope that all students will not agree on the meanings given to the word.

GROUP 1	**GROUP 2**	**GROUP 3**
democrat	liberal	tent
republican	conservative	house
socialist	moderate	home
evangelist	secular humanist	dwelling

GROUP 4	**GROUP 5**	**GROUP 6**
leadership	seamstress	beautiful
administration	dressmaker	cute
power structure	tailor	attractive
establishment	sewer	pretty

After students define each word in several of the groups like those above, they should note that the words in some of the groups (groups 1, 2, 4, and 6) are more difficult to define than those in groups 3 and 5. However, they should also be led to see that not all students give the same meanings to the words in groups 3 and 5.

We hope that the attempts at defining words in groups like those above will help students understand the following:

1. People give different meanings to abstract words as they do to all words, but it is more difficult to define an abstract word than a concrete one.
2. Regardless of the various definitions people give to the same word, we frequently act as if everyone agreed on the meaning of the word.
3. Some words which are used to designate different--sometimes even opposite or conflicting—practices can be given identical or similar definitions. (The definitions of *democracy* and *socialism* frequently come out amazingly similar in class discussions.)

4. The lexical definition of a word frequently has little or no bearing on how people use the word as a label.

5. Abstract words should be defined within their particular contexts. (Both the writer and the reader must consider such things as the geographical and historical referents. For instance, Communism in China, in Yugoslavia, and in Russia were not necessarily the same thing. Communism in Russia in the late 1960s was significantly different from the practices described as Communistic in the early 1950s. Democracy in America in 1996 is something different from democracy in America in 1836.)

6. "Pure definitions" of a word like democracy do not exist because we must finally talk about democracy in specific terms. We must define democracy by looking at the actual practices that are described as democratic in America or some other country in the 1990s. Or look at the practices that were described as democratic in these countries in 1800. We should also recognize that a significant group of Americans do not call this country a democracy but insist that it is a republic.

Our purpose is to help students see that the best way to define an abstract term is to use as many concrete examples as possible to expl. in to readers what the word means to the writers. If writers attempt to define abstractions by referring continually to other abstract terms, they are unlikely to clarify concepts either for themselves or their readers. In short, writers should always attempt to provide specific examples of what they are talking about when they use an abstract word in a particular context.

Suggested Questions

As students search for information to include in this theme, they must ask themselves questions such as these:

1. What does the word seem to mean to most people?

2. What does the word mean to me? Why?

3. How does my definition seem to be different from most other people's? Why?

4. How can I be certain that my readers will know exactly what the word means to me after they read my paper, even though the word might not mean exactly the same thing to them?

5. What specific, concrete examples must I provide readers to help them understand what the word means to me?

Students may find that they do not really know what a word means even though they use it frequently. This discovery may send them to the dictionary, and you should not discourage this. However, they should soon discover that the lexical definition is

not enough to help them clarify the meaning of the word for themselves. Therefore, you must be sure that this assignment is not construed as a dictionary exercise or an exercise in tracing the etymology of a word. Among other things, students should discover the limitations of a lexical definition, especially a definition of an abstract word. Further, students should discover the importance of knowing exactly what it means to make a definition of an abstract word clear to readers so that both writers and readers can actually understand what is being talked about.

This assignment involves a significant problem in all communication. Abstract words enable us to make discoveries about things that we could not possibly make if we were limited to talking about items that have only physical referents in the world. However, abstract words can lead to fuzzy thinking: we frequently assume that we are all talking about the same thing because we attach the same label to an undefined something that exists only in the minds of people. Until we specify the thing, or activity, or idea that the term is meant to designate, we have not told our readers exactly what we mean.

The Assignment

Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to write an adequate definition of a word such as *freedom, love, rich, affluence*, or *power* or of a phrase such as *generation X, New Ager, secular humanist,* or *supply side economics*;
2. that they are concerned with the word's or phrase's denotative meanings, but also its connotations, and particularly with their associations with the word;
3. that their audience is the teacher.

The Actual Writing and So Forth

(See Theme 1 through 4.)

Sample Theme

A year ago, a student teacher asked the senior author to talk with her students about censorship in the schools. During the course of the hour, I gave a very brief definition of censorship. The next day the student teacher asked the students to respond in writing to my visit. She suggested a great number of topics that the students could write about, and the students suggested even more. She gave the students a week to research their topics, and she encouraged them to talk to people to obtain additional information. Intrigued by censorship, one student who asked not to be identified read parts of several books and articles, talked to school and public librarians as well as to two teachers, and wrote the following:

Censorship, a Negative Act

One dictionary gives these two meanings to the word censorship: the act of censoring; the office or power of a censor. Short definitions fill dictionaries. Obviously, the people who make dictionaries cannot give all the meanings to all the words they define. If they did, dictionaries would spread over so many volumes that few people could afford them. Consider the size of a dictionary if it contained definitions of words as long as the one that I will give to censorship.

Censorship is a negative act. The deed says no to people. A person in authority says to the people, "No, you cannot read this book. No, you cannot see this movie. No, this magazine may not print this story or this picture. No, you students in the schools cannot study this subject or read that book. No, you may not use this word or that phrase in society today."

Censorship is the decision by an individual or a group to keep others from seeing, hearing, or reading something. Examples: a school board decides that Judy Blume's <u>Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret</u> should not be in the school library because a few parents think the book is immoral. A school board decides that evolution cannot be taught in biology without a full treatment of creationism. A principal orders an artist to draw pants over the naked little boy in a children's classic. An English teacher blacks out a word in all the anthologies because she thinks it will provoke students to "think evil thoughts."

As you can see, censorship takes many forms. It's the removal of books from libraries or classrooms. It's the decision to keep certain books from ever entering public or school libraries. It's the attempt to keep people from reading or seeing something by blacking out words, by pasting pages together, by refusing to allow certain books to be purchased for public or school libraries, for classrooms, or even for bookstores.

Censorship is also the suppression of military secrets in time of war. That is done by officials to protect the military. Most people agree that such censorship is necessary to save lives. But it is perhaps one of the few acts of censorship that is justified.

Publishers practice censorship. They won't accept certain kinds of stories from authors. Or they change words or delete paragraphs that they think people should not see. Radio and television producers do the same to "protect the morals of the people."

Censorship, then, is the act of an individual or group to keep people from seeing, hearing, or reading what the censor thinks is bad. But the very act of censorship frequently produces results exactly the opposite of what the censor wants. When the people or students in schools discover that something has been censored, they rush out to find the book or story so that they can read it. Censorship, then, sometimes turns a little known book into a best seller.

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Theme 12

The Writing Task

Students describe persons who they think are wealthy or rich but who do not have a lot of money. The student writers indicate to their readers through their descriptions why they admire the person described. The audience for this assignment is the writers' classmates.

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The students' purpose is to show their readers--their peers—how a word like wealthy or rich can be applied to a person who does not have many material possessions.

As the teacher, your purposes are

(1) to give students additional experience in working with abstract words, like wealthy, and to give them an opportunity to discover for themselves what a full range of meaning such a word may have; and

(2) to give students additional experience in describing a person, concentrating primarily on their qualities.

Finding Information and Precise Words for an Audience

You should point out that the students' task is to describe a person whom they admire very much and who they think is rich, not because of their personal wealth, but because of other assets. Students should understand that their task here is not to give a physical description of the person but to describe their characteristics and qualities so that the reader will understand why the student admires them. A good theme is one that convinces the reader that the person described is rich in ways other than personal wealth. A good theme is one that describes the person's characteristics adequately to convince the reader that the person described is wealthy. A poor theme is one that does not give the reader sufficient information to come to the same conclusions as the writer did.

Suggested Questions

Students should ask questions like these to attempt to find the matter and the words.

1. What is it about this person that makes me feel that they are wealthy?

2. Are these attributes ones that I think most other people associate with the word *wealthy*?

3. How does my description of this person's characteristics affect my definition of the term *wealthy*? What *meanings* do I wish to convey to my reader when I use the word *wealthy* to describe this person?

4. What kind of words must I choose to be specific enough for my reader to understand why I am describing this person as being *wealthy*?

5. How can I honestly portray this person without exaggerating? How can I make my reader feel that the person is wealthy even though the reader would not necessarily have considered the attributes I use in describing my wealthy person as those which are usually used to describe a *wealthy* person?

This assignment should encourage students to write very sensitively; they should produce several extremely vivid and moving portraits of the people being described. Once again, however, in this theme assignment, students may have to be reminded about control and distance in their writing. (See Theme 2.) Students tend to romanticize on this assignment, sprinkling their papers with sentimental and literary clichés.

The Assignment

Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to describe a person they think is wealthy, but who does not have a lot of money, and to indicate to their reader—a person their own age—through the description why the writer admires that person;

2. that they are to describe the person's traits so well that the reader will agree with the writer that the described person is rich even though they do not have a lot of money.

The Actual Writing and So Forth

(See Theme 1 through 4.)

Sample Themes

(See previous themes.)

Chapter 7:

Controlling Tone

THE THEME TASKS IN THIS FINAL CHAPTER CALL FOR STUDENTS TO WRITE FOUR THEMES which help them understand and control tone. They are asked to deal with ideas, events, decisions, or statements that they feel strongly about, and to write about them in such a way that their reader will respond positively, rather than react negatively, to what the writer has to say.

Themes 14 and 15 give students an opportunity to tell someone off, and then to look at what they have written to determine whether they have accomplished any other purpose than purging themselves of their hostilities. Through a series of questions that help the writer analyze what they have written and ask what purpose they have or have not achieved, we attempt to lead the student to a revision of their papers in which they are consciously aware of tone. Through theme tasks that focus on an understanding and control of tone, we attempt to help students gain further insights into writing effectively for an audience in order to achieve a meaningful response from their reader.

Theme 15 asks students to write a letter to the editor. Here, again, they must be very conscious of tone. This assignment requires them to strive for economy and clarity of expression to make their point quickly and forcefully.

Theme 16 asks them to write an editorial. This assignment requires them to look back to, and draw upon, all the previous assignments in the sequence. They must come to their point quickly and concisely; they must be conscious of the meanings of their words and the impact of those words on their audience; they must make their purpose clear; and they must control their tone so that they are forceful and convincing without being pompous, condescending, or irate.

Themes 14 and 15

The Writing Task

Students write a letter to a person in authority, telling the person off for some recent action, decision, or statement that the person made.

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The students' purposes are:

(1) to express to their readers the writer's complete disgust over a recent action, decision, or statement which they find totally unacceptable;

(2) to tell someone off in such a way that the person will read the letter, understand the criticism, and, even take positive steps to change, or at least defend, the action, decision, or statement;

(3) to present their anger or disgust forcefully and honestly, yet with tact and control; and

(4) to elicit a positive response rather than a negative reaction from their reader.

As the teacher, your purposes are:

(1) to give students an opportunity to come to grips with a problem that arises frequently in life—disagreeing with a person in authority and expressing that disagreement so convincingly that the person will pay some attention to the letter;

(2) to give students an opportunity to continue working with emotive language, and to learn how to control that language;

(3) to give students a further understanding of *tone* and how tone affects the reader; and

(4) to give them additional experience in writing for a specific audience.

Preliminary Exercise

All of us have had the experience of wanting to tell someone in authority exactly what we think about their decisions, statements, or actions. For example, a student might become very upset with the decision of the principal to expel another student. What do they do? Do they tell the principal off? If so, how do they go about it? Or a student might want to tell a policeman off. What do they say?

You should point out that the student must examine their past experiences, isolating one in which they became so furious that they were tempted to write a letter or to confront

a person in authority and tell them off. Their task, then, is simply to tell that person off in writing. They should pull out all the stops and say exactly what they think. They can use any word they want to. They should give full vent to their emotions.

This is the first of what are actually three theme tasks. You will probably not want to collect the first theme. You should simply let the students write as they please. You should let them become as angry as they want in the letters, for the purpose of Themes 14 and 15 is to teach students how to control the tone of what they write. You should also tell students, after they have finished writing, that they are not to share their letters with anyone. (Note: One teacher reported that a student wrote a very angry letter severely criticizing the principal for what the student thought were unenforceable rules. The student showed the letter to several friends and other teachers. The principal heard about the letter, demanded to see it, and then berated the teacher for making such an assignment.)

Finding Information and Precise Words for an Audience

You might mimeograph a letter to someone in authority, telling them off in a most angry fashion, and let students examine it. The letter should be so emotional that students can see immediately that it will not persuade the person in authority to do anything but get angry.

Suggested Questions

At this point you should ask the students to re-examine their first letters. Would they be willing to send those letters to the person in authority? How would the person receiving the letter react? If they had done something to precipitate such a letter, would they be persuaded by an angry letter to react to what they had done? Or would they be so angry that they might do the same thing again? How would a third party—one not involved in the decision or action, nor affected by it—react to the letter? Would they be sympathetic with the writer, or would the tone of the letter persuade them that the writer is probably wrong? As the students re-examine their first angry letters, they should ask questions that will lead them to examine the tone of their letters—questions like these:

1. How would I react if I got such a letter?

2. What words do I use that might be particularly offensive to the reader? Why? What words might I substitute that would help me make my point in a less offensive way? How can I say what is on my mind in such a way that the reader might listen to what I have to say and perhaps revise their actions or opinions?

3. What is the issue at stake? Have I attacked the issue, or the person?

4. What significant differences in our opinion result from our points of view? If I were in the reader's position, how would I view the situation? How does that point of view differ from mine? Why?

5. On what issues or aspects of the issue do we seem to be in agreement or at least close to agreement? What issues or aspects are negotiable or insignificant? Is there a possibility of a compromise? If so, how might I write my letter so that the reader will be willing to explore the possibilities of a compromise?

6. Am I reacting to an issue, or to a person? Is the particular issue part of a larger one? If so, what is it and how does this issue fit into the whole disagreement?

7. Is the reader going to judge my argument on the basis of what I say, or just upon who I am? If they might react negatively to my argument just because of my name, how can I write the letter in order to get them to see the issues?

8. Do I have the facts straight? Am I representing things as truthfully as I can? Is my argument logical? Have I stuck to the significant issues? Have I supported my criticisms with concrete examples?

9. Does my language communicate with my reader? Does it turn them off? Is it clear? Is it truthful, yet tactful? How do I sound-angry, concerned, irate, disgusted, haughty? How should I sound to achieve the purpose that I want to achieve? What is the purpose that I want to achieve?

10. What is tone? What aspects of language set the tone of a piece of writing? What sort of personality do I present to my reader in this letter? Is it the person I want them to see as me? If so, why? If not, why not? How can I rewrite the letter to present a different personality to the reader?

From such questions the students should see the effects that such a letter might have on a reader. They should see that while the first letter might do a great deal of good for the writer, it may have little positive effect on the reader. Once the writers have unburdened themselves in the first letter, they should be able to think more clearly about the long-range objectives of writing a letter to a person for a positive purpose.

The Assignment

After you have completed the discussion of the first angry letters, you should ask the students to rewrite these letters so that the tone will not insult the person in authority but will persuade the individual to assess the argument of the writer. Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to rewrite their first letter, presenting their anger or disgust forcefully and honestly, yet with tact and control;

2. that they are to tell the person in authority off in such a way that the person will read the letter, understand the criticism, and, perhaps, even take positive steps to change, or at least defend, the action, decision, or statement that has provoked the writing of the letter;

3. that a good letter is one that succeeds in telling the person off, but does so tactfully enough that the person in authority will pay attention to what is said and will react positively rather than negatively;

4. that a poor letter is one that simply tells the person off in such a manner that the only response will be an angry one.

The Actual Writing

(See *The Actual Writing* and *Evaluation* of previous themes.) After the students have written their second letters, you should collect these letters and evaluate them carefully.

Revision

(In this case, the revision is Theme 14.) After the evaluation of the second letter, the student should decide whether their letter should be rewritten—to the same person, telling them off. A student might decide they should give their letter to a disinterested third party first before they rewrite or send it. Or this time a student might decide they will not send a letter after all. If a student decides not to write a third letter, their assignment is to write a theme in which they explain why they made the decision. (We received many excellent justifications for not writing a third letter from students in pilot schools.)

Evaluation

(See T*he Actual Writing* above and Theme 1.)

If a student does write a third letter, you should compare it with the second one to determine what the student has learned about controlling tone.

Sample Themes

Because of the nature of this assignment, we have not included any sample letters or themes of justification. Pilot-school teachers suggested that these themes not be studied in class.

Theme 15

The Writing Task

Students write letters to the editor of a local newspaper about something in the community that they feel compelled to write about.

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The students' purposes are:

(1) to present to their readers a strong, clear statement of their opinion on a particular topic of concern to the community in which they live,

(2) to convince their readers that their opinion is reasonable, valid, and based on an accurate assessment of the facts, and

(3) to persuade their readers to consider their opinion, investigate the matter further, or to take some action.

As the teacher, your purposes are:

(1) to continue giving students an opportunity to write for a specific audience,

(2) to continue giving students an opportunity to examine the world around them and to react, in writing, to something in their world that troubles them, and

(3) to continue giving them an opportunity to find appropriate matter and words for composition and to learn how to discard irrelevant information.

Finding Information and Precise Words for an Audience

You should explain that the task here is for students to consider one recent decision made by a person of authority in the community or school, or a recent event, or an action that students feel strongly about. They are to write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, expressing their views on the decision, action, or event.

It may be necessary and valuable to discuss editorial pages and the way Letters to the Editor are used by various newspapers. You should probably use the local paper(s) as the main source for answering questions like those below. While it is possible to make some valid generalizations about editorial or opinion pages, it is imperative that students understand that each paper sets its own editorial policies which can differ radically from paper to paper. With this in mind, you may want to pose such questions as these:

1. What seems to be the purpose(s) of the editorial or opinion page(s) in this newspaper?

2. What kind of writing appears on this page?

3. What seems to be the function of the letters to the editor in this newspaper? What seem to be the reasons why people write such letters? This discussion should begin with the students listing specific reasons before they attempt to classify the letters by categories. Here are a few examples of categories for Letters to the Editor:

   (a) letters seeking advice or answers to questions such as when street repairs are going to be made;

   (b) letters which are either critical of or in support of a public issue or a public figure;

   (c) letters which are merely complaining about someone or something;

   (d) letters in response to previous editorials, and

   (e) letters in response to other letters to the editor.

4. Are all letters to the editor really to the editor?

5. What purpose(s) do the letters seem to serve for the newspaper? the writer? the reader?

6. Do the writers of the letters seem to be aware of their audience? If you think they are, what specific elements in their writing make you feel that they are writing for a specific audience? If they do not seem to be aware of their audience, what makes you think that they are not?

7. Do you think the writers achieve the purpose their letters seem to be seeking? If so, why? If not, why not?

Suggested Questions for Class Discussion

In class discussion you should lead students to examine recent activities, isolating only those about which they feel strongly. As students decide upon decisions, actions, or events that they want to write about, they should ask themselves

1. Why is this situation important enough to merit my reacting in a letter to the editor?

2. What specific reasons make this situation important?

3. To whom is the situation important? Is it important for a large group of people? Are the people concerned likely to be readers of the newspaper?

4. Who is the audience? What do they know about the situation? How much do I need to tell them to give them sufficient information? What kind of examples must I use to make the situation clear to them?

5. How does my position compare with most of the other people who are concerned with the situation? Are they likely to hold a position which is similar to mine, or in opposition to it? What purpose am I trying to achieve by writing this letter? Am I trying to persuade? inform? seek answers? clarify? something else? or, perhaps, even a combination of several purposes?

6. What tone is best suited to my intended audience and my purpose(s)? How do I want to represent myself to my audience?

7. Have I concentrated on the issue, or have I wandered into personalities and/or irrelevant issues? Have I presented the facts as I know and understand them? Have I gotten as much information as possible? Have I attempted to understand other positions and take them into account in stating my own position? Who and/or what are my sources of information? Are they reliable? Why? Is there another source(s) available that I have not examined but should?

8. Have my answers to any of the questions above caused me to alter my opinion in any way? If so, how? How does this change in opinion affect my purpose for writing the letter? How does it affect the nature of my audience and my tone?

After students have found topics for their letters, they should consider how much information they must include in the letters and how they will handle the matter so that they communicate with the readers of the local newspaper. Is it necessary to use a paragraph or two to remind the reader of the decision, event, or action being discussed? Is it necessary to give the reader a great deal of detail? If so, how can the student compress as much information as possible into one or two paragraphs since most newspapers will not publish a letter of more than three hundred words? The important thing that students need to realize is that a good letter to the editor is much like a good editorial. Letters must have a good beginning which give readers a frame of reference for the matter and the reason for the particular response that the writer is giving.

After students have decided for themselves how much background information they must give the reader, they should consider how they are going to react to the event, action, or decision. Do they want to persuade the readers to act? If so, how will they go about it? What must the tone of their letters be if they are going to persuade readers? What reasons must they give for action? Or what reasons must they give to get readers to think a different way-if that is the desired goal?

The Assignment

Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that their task is to write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, reacting to, or expressing their opinion of, a recent decision in the community, an action, or an event;
2. that they are to summarize, very briefly, the decision, action, or event so that their readers will understand what they are talking about;
3. that they are to write in language that will communicate directly with the readers of the editorial pages of the newspaper, and to do this, they may need to study the style of the editorials to discover the language and the sentence structure they need to use to communicate with the readers.

The Actual Writing and So Forth

(See previous theme assignments.)

Theme 18

The Writing Task

Students write an editorial for the student newspaper on a subject of concern to a number of students.

The Writer's and Teacher's Purpose

The students' purposes are:

(1) to present relevant facts clearly and concisely in writing,

(2) to present a reasoned opinion that is clearly stated and conveyed in a tone appropriate to the subject matter, the opinion expressed, and the audience addressed, and

(3) to persuade their readers to accept their opinion and then to take some kind of action.

As the teacher, your purposes are:

(1) to continue giving students an opportunity to select incidents or ideas from their world and to write about them for a specific audience, and

(2) to work on the development of paragraphs.

Finding Information and Precise Words for an Audience

You might explain that the task here is for students to select a subject of current concern to a number of students in the school and to write an editorial that could possibly be published in the student newspaper. A good editorial is one that states the problem or the reason for writing as clearly and concisely as possible, presents the writer's arguments convincingly, and calls for the readers to react in some manner. A poor editorial is one that does not take the audience into consideration or one that does not cause the readers to think about the subject and/or to react in some way.

Before beginning to find the matter and the words for this assignment, students might return once again to the editorial or opinion page(s) of the local newspaper and examine editorials in both the local newspaper and the school newspaper. The students should examine several editorials to identify some of the elements that are present in this kind of writing. They should ask the following questions:

1. What specific things are these editorials about? Into what general categories could the editorials be divided?

2. Are there noticeable differences in the subject matter and/or writing between the commercial newspaper and the school newspaper? What, specifically, are these differences? Do there seem to be good reasons for the differences?

3. What purposes do the editorials seem to be serving? How well do they succeed? If some succeed better than others, why? What is specifically wrong with the ones that do not seem to achieve their purposes?

4. How would you describe the tone(s) of the various editorials? Are they all about the same in tone or do they tend to differ significantly? Is there any correlation between the tone and the purpose of a given editorial?

5. Do the writers seem to be aware of their audiences? If they are, what specific things make you feel that they are? If they are not, what specific things make you feel that they are not?

6. Are you given sufficient information to understand the issue presented in an editorial? Are specific facts given? Do the writers support their opinions? Do they convince you of the validity of their positions? How do they do all of these things?

7. What elements seem to be present in the most effective editorials?

8. Do all editorials seem to be organized in the same fashion? How would you describe this organization? Why is organization important?

This discussion, like the one about letters to the editor in the previous assignment, should give students an idea of what editorials are and how one goes about preparing to write one. Students will not necessarily agree on the answers to all of the questions, nor should they. The purpose is not to make hard and fast rules which do not hold true for all editorials, but to make some valid generalizations that will be useful to the student writers in this writing task.

In class discussion you might point out that the easiest kind of editorial to write is one divided into three paragraphs. In the first paragraph, writers establish their news peg--the event, situation, or idea that precipitated their writing the editorials. In the second paragraph, they present their arguments or additional facts. In the last paragraph, they draw their conclusions and call for action—if action on the part of the readers seems appropriate.

By calling attention to the clear-cut purposes of each paragraph, you can emphasize paragraph development through this assignment. You should point out that each paragraph should be developed as fully as possible and that each detail in the paragraph should be relevant to the total editorial.

In class discussion you should point out that before an editorial writer for any newspaper can write an editorial, they need to ask themselves:

1. What do I know about the topic? What additional information do I need? Where can I get that information? What are reliable sources for additional information on this topic?

2. What exactly is my purpose for writing about this topic? What is my position? What are my reasons for taking this position? Are they logical? Do they take all facts into consideration?

3. How do I want my readers to react? Who is my audience? How will the position that I take compare with the position that most of the readers are likely to hold? Do I intend to persuade them to take my position or merely to inform them of the position I hold? Do I intend to do something else? If so, what?

4. What tone do I want to convey to my readers through the language that I use? What kind of picture of me do I want to convey to them through the writing?

5. How much information will I need to include in the editorial to be certain that everyone knows what I am talking about? Do I need to be concerned with what amounts to several audiences, i.e., students, administrators, parents, taxpayers? How will the amount of information that each audience has about the topic differ? What information will definitely need to be included in the editorial? What can be left out? How will I organize the information that I intend to include?

You should also point out that the editorial writers' problem is to sustain their reader's interest throughout the editorial without being unduly cute or clever. Many student editorials suffer from attempts to be clever, or they simply die because the writer did not choose a lively topic and succumbed to triteness. The topic must be of interest; the reasons for writing the editorial must be real; the need for action must be justified.

The Assignment

Students who are ready to write should have all these things clearly in mind:

1. that they are is to write a three-paragraph editorial for the students who read the student newspaper;
2. that the subject of their editorial should be of interest to a number of the students reading the paper;
3. that they are to present their arguments forcefully and make a reasoned plea for some kind of action—if a call for action is appropriate.

The Actual Writing and So Forth

(See previous themes.)

CHAPTER 8:

Grading Themes

EDUCATION IS CYCLICAL. DURING MY 44 YEARS IN TEACHING, I HAVE WITNESSED AT least three cycles in which teachers attempted to abandon the task of assigning letter grades to themes. When the assignments in this book were tested in pilot schools, we recommended that teachers write at least a paragraph of comments on student papers and not give grades on each theme. Rather, we suggested that students keep writing folders that teachers evaluate at the end of a grading period. Some teachers liked the idea; others had already been doing that for years; still others treated us as if we were revolutionaries whose ideas should be dismissed even though they were far from being new.

You might dismiss that teacher as being biased, or extreme, or unfair. But in my years of teaching, I don't think she is a rarity. She is one who grades on the personality of the writer, or on her like or dislike of the topic, or on the "poetic use of language," as was the case with Theme A.

To demonstrate to prospective teachers and to veteran teachers attending workshops how subjective theme grading can be, I designed the exercise below. After giving teachers time to read the theme instructions carefully, I gave them approximately ten to fifteen minutes to read through the six themes and assign a letter grade to each. That time is approximately how long it takes a teacher to evaluate six themes, making a few marginal notes and assigning a letter grade to each paper. I did not ask for marginal notes. Rather, I simply called for the readers to assign letter grades.

When time permitted, I asked the teachers to go back through the themes and decide how they would rank them by writing in the margin the number one for the best paper and on down to six for the weakest. The results of more than twenty years of experimentation with this exercise follow the themes.

The Task

You are to select some object that you like or dislike intensely in your neighborhood, in your home, in your city, or in your school. You can describe your bedroom, your backyard, a statue, a tree, a car—anything that causes you to react emotionally to it. For this assignment you may not describe a person. You must describe a thing, and you must describe it realistically.

As you describe the object, pick out those features that cause you to like or dislike it. Don't say that the object is pretty or ugly. Rather, describe it in such a way that your reader can visualize it as being pretty or ugly.

Your purpose is to make your reader—in this case, the teacher—feel approximately the same way about the object as you do. What causes you to react emotionally to the object? What features trigger the response? What words will help your reader understand and sympathize with your response?

There are two key phrases to remember as you write: realistic, believable description and emotional response. Your description should trigger that response.

Theme A

The sun shines! Like two worshipers of the sun, the two trees lift their life-like limbs and drink in the warm, clear sunshine. Their thirst quenched, almost immediately the birds begin the day by ridding the trees of insects and dead limbs from their freshly-combed hair. This task accomplished, the trees now ready themselves for a day of many activities such as: cleaning the birds nests, fluffing the newly-grown buds, and keeping their trunks well-groomed. Afternoon arrives accompanied by billowy clouds and humid weather. The trees have been working tirelessly all morning. Time for rest! All is quiet except for the faint rustling of wind blown branches.

Theme B

There used to be a tree next to the driveway at home. It was a birch. I really liked that tree. I mean, you can really become attached to a tree. Do you know what I mean? It had smooth bark that didn't even feel like bark. It felt like paper with gnarled bumps on it. When the wind blew through its small branches you were scared to death it would break. It was fragile like that. You could take both hands and wrap them around the trunk with half a hand left over. That made you feel like protecting it. I guess that's why I panicked every time it stormed. Then one day it got run over. My grandfather backed into it with the car and killed it. That was one of the only things I really liked about the place and it had to get run over.

Theme C

From the time my dad planted trees in our backyard, I liked the willow oak best. It grew faster than the other trees for the first five or six years until the pin oak topped it. It seems to split right at the top of its trunk so that two twin towers grew right out of it. Those two branches made a slight fork right out of the trunk and then pointed right at the sky. They're now about forty feet high with smaller branches sticking out of them all over. Those towers are covered with limbs — some big, some little, but all have lots of tiny little leaves that are pretty and green. I really like that tree. It's really pretty and gives lots of shade on hot days.

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Theme D

There's this gnarled old apple tree on grandma's farm that I like. It's by the big old barn filled with hay and things. That weather-beaten barn brings back memories every time I see it. When grandpa was alive, he used to let us kids play basketball in the hay mow when it was cleaned out. The tree had a couple of swings hanging from its branches. One was just a rope that you could hold onto and swing out until you could almost touch that old chicken coop. Haven't been any chickens in that place for years. But it's fun to swing as far out as you can and try to kick the coop with one foot. You get two points if you kick it with both feet and a third point if you touch the trunk on the way back. All of us kids played in that tree when we visited grandma. It was a good place to work up an appetite for one of her apple pies. She makes the best in the whole state.

Theme E

Jack is a bully. He outweighs every kid in the class by at least fifty pounds. His hands are always dirty and he smells like grease. His mouth is as dirty as his hands; foul words come out of it all the time. He looks as if he got his clothes in the bargain basement of Goodwill, and his hair looks as if he combs it with a comb with only half its teeth. Jack is meaner than a junkyard dog. He growls all the time and intimidates everyone, even the teacher. He makes me sick. I wish I were big enough to handle him just once, but I'm not. So I have to put up with his demands and give him half of a candy bar if I'm dumb enough to eat one around him. I just wish he would disappear. I hate that _____.

Theme F

Aunt Betty gave mom the clock that hangs above the mantle, and since she lives only two blocks from our house, mom can't take the clock down. Aunt Betty says it's an antique—a priceless antique. Dad says it's a clock maker's mistake, and I say it's a dirty trick played on us by my aunt. It reminds me of a misshapen gingerbread house. It's a dirty brown with all kinds of geometric shapes cut out of wood. The round dial is covered with flaking gold leaf, and the black hands are so ornate that they detract from all that pealing gold. I guess ostentation might be the right word to describe that clock. Perhaps broken ostentation. Its glass face is cracked, and Aunt Betty said that she's talked it over with several antique dealers who are trying to find a new glass cover. In the meantime, I sometimes jump up and down in front of the mantle when no one's home, hoping that the clock will come loose and hit the floor. But no such luck. So it just dominates the room filled with otherwise modern furniture.

The Grading Results

I have given this grading exercise for more than twenty years to prospective teachers and to teachers and administrators attending workshops. The results are predictable: every theme receives every grade from A to F.

When I ask that the themes be ranked from the best to the poorest, the results are almost the same as those for the grades. Every theme except D is placed in every position from top to bottom. Theme D has made it to the top approximately twice in every hundred ratings.

On the two occasions that I gave directions and criteria for holistic scoring, the points assigned to each theme were much more uniform than the grades. No theme received a score lower than three on a 5-point scale.

Comments

Themes A and E provoked sometimes heated discussion. In some of my classes, Theme A received an almost equal number of A's and F's. Those who gave A's noted the poetic descriptions; those who assigned F's quickly commented on the lack of realistic description and clear pronoun referents. Theme E received a preponderance of F's because it was written about a person. Many prospective teachers said they would have given it an A had not the directions said specifically that the student writers should not describe a person. Several teachers who gave Theme E an A said that they would ask the writer to write a description of a thing. One prospective teacher argued passionately that the writer followed directions since "a bully is not a person." After discussing the theme at length, most teachers said they would give the theme a grade of A or B and ask the student to write another theme, describing a thing.

At the end of the discussion of the theme grades, I would tell students that I wrote Themes C through E to illustrate various problems I had encountered. I wrote Theme E after a middle school student told me that one afternoon she could not write about the assigned task because of an encounter with a bully during lunch hour. The student writer was so upset that she wrote about the bully. Fortunately for the student, the teacher accepted the theme and asked her to write another one later.

Eight years ago a teacher in a middle school requested that my students respond to a set of papers so her students would receive a different perspective on their writing. My students did not give grades but wrote comments on separate sheets of paper. When asked what grades they would have assigned, I discovered that every paper would have received grades ranging from A to C or C through F. In discussion, I learned that the student writers' choices of topics greatly affected the grades. For example, several students noted they were turned off by papers entitled Baby Murder (abortion), Hero Hitler, and Coon Hunting. We had a very lively discussion of the role of a teacher as evaluator.

I seriously doubt that most teachers in this nation will ever be able to avoid assigning grades to every piece of writing they assign. Teachers tell me that objections to the failure to assign letter grades come from these constituents: (1) the students themselves, (2) their parents, (3) administrators, (4) colleagues. But it seems to me that teachers who have students keep writing folders, who carefully comment on each theme assignment, and who evaluate student's progress at the end of a grading period can justify a final grade without assigning a letter grade to each theme. And from years of experience, I also believe that conscientious teachers can build letter grades into the theme task and can do an extremely creditable job of assigning grades fairly.

CONCLUSION

Everyone agrees that the completion of a clearly written composition involves a fairly complicated process. The writer prepares ideas, organizes them, talks to himself or herself while working through the composition, then reviews the piece to see what changes need to be made, all in order to accomplish the clearest path to the intended effect.

This book pushes the notion of writing as a process into the realm of intellectual discovery. Through its classroom activities, this book encourages teachers and students to use the writing process as a way of discovering new ideas and of focusing their attention on vocabulary, events, and people so they generate new and penetrating insights. The writing process becomes an opportunity to develop a personal thinking process, a growth mechanism that will stimulate participants to become more astute observers and more competent learners than when they started.

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